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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

NUMBER 18

The Unfair Fare Affair

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The abduction of Alexander Waverly leads Solo and Illya to a fantastic conspiracy spreading across Europe.

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THE UNFAIR FARE AFFAIR

Chapter 1

Mr. Waverly Is Taken For A Ride!

IT WAS NOT at all the kind of affair in which the sophisticated operatives of U.N.C.L.E. usually found themselves embroiled. Indeed, the Command would probably never have been brought into it at all except that the Policy and Operations chief of Section One unexpectedly found himself suffering the pangs of hunger one wet afternoon in Holland.

Alexander Waverly, however, did find himself thus famished that day and decided to seek a shortcut back to his hotel in Amsterdam. And that's when the trouble started. For in taking this step he inadvertently stumbled on the first small pointer that was to lead the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement into one of the most bizarre assignments ever handled by those superlative agents Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin.

Waverly had been attending an Interpol conference in the Dutch capital and had chosen, even though it was winter, to stay on for a few days' vacation in Holland.

He had listened to the carillons and barrel organs of Amsterdam, and he had made the tour of the canals. He had been to Delft, to Leiden, and to Arnhem; he had visited the radio station at Hilversum and the Philips electronics empire at Nijmegen. He had admired the superlative planning of Rotterdam's postwar shopping center, and he had found him self a boy again amid the miniature docks and airfields and city streets of the model town of Madurodam, near Scheveningen. And today he had made up his mind to take a walk in the country for a change.

It had been a fine morning, and he had taken a bus all the way to Amersfoort and then another up to Harderwijk, which lay eastward from Amsterdam across a stretch of what had once been the Zuider Zee.

After a modest lunch in a dark-beamed *bodega* whose tables were spread with covers resembling squares of red-flowered carpet, he had decided to cross over to Oost Flevoland. The island of reclaimed land was

featureless and flat in the wintry sunshine. On one side of the dike carrying the road along which he walked were inundated fields. On the other, the cold gray waters of the Ijsselmeer stretched away to the cranes and funnels and mellowed brick waterfronts of Amsterdam. And ahead, an irregular line of trees apparently growing out of the desolate sea marked the position of the Noordholland peninsula just over the horizon.

He had walked about five miles, a third of the distance to Lelystad, when the sun withdrew behind a dark bank of clouds that had blown up from the west.

Waverly hesitated. He scanned the sky, and his lean, creased face crumpled into an expression of irritation. He had intended to go on to the town in the hope of getting a ear to take him to Kampen, back on the mainland, and then Zwoll—from which he could have caught a bus back home. But it was getting confoundedly overcast and cold; it looked like rain… and there was this sudden ache in his middle that told him he needed food.

Abruptly he turned about and retraced his steps. He would go back the way he had come. It would be much quicker in the long run, he would be able to eat sooner, and if he was lucky, he would find a shortcut and avoid following the curve of the coast the way he had on the outward journey.

The island was crisscrossed by dikes. Soon he found one leading inland in the direction he wanted, and he left the road.

He had been walking along the waterlogged path for only a few minutes, when there was a low murmur of wind, stirring the grasses at his feet, and a squall of fine rain blew past him like a cloud of smoke.

Soon a persistent drizzle was falling from the pewter sky. It rolled up behind him from the west, dewing the shoulders of his light tweed topcoat, soaking his trousers behind the knee, and trickling down his neck. Amsterdam had disappeared in the mist, and the ripples flowing across the Ijsselmeer were breaking into tumbles of gray foam.

Somewhere ahead there were osiers and clumps of alder shielding a mansarded slate roof—though whether the building was on the island or across on the far side of the water he could not yet see.

Below the dike, the green of the drenched *polder* was almost indecently bright beneath the sullen sky. Farther away, plowed fields were awash, the tops of the ridges barely surfacing above the water in the furrows. A long way to the south, the domed tower of a church rose above the flat land, but

otherwise there was no sign of life; not even a windmill, Waverly thought bitterly, to look at!

When he came at last to the strip of water dividing Oost Flevoland from the mainland, he found to his disgust that he had miscalculated: he was nowhere near the bridge, and there wasn't a causeway or a ferry to be seen.

Fuming, Waverly hunched deeper down inside the wet collar of his coat and squelched along the waterlogged grass at the water's edge.

Before long he rounded a spinney and found himself a few yards away from a boatman sitting inside a crude wooden shelter. At his feet a kind of punt rode the rain-pitted swell lapping at the sandy bank. Waverly looked over the channel. It was about three hundred yards across. Beyond a belt of trees on the far side, he could see the roofs of a village and the gleam of passing traffic on a road. From over there, surely, he would be able to get a car….

"Good day," he said in German, approaching the boat man. "I'm afraid I seem to have missed my way. Could you possibly take me across?"

"Where are you from?" the boatman grunted, rising to his feet. He was a tall man, raw-boned and craggy.

Waverly was thinking of something else. "I'm from Section One," he said absently. "Er… that is to say, I have just walked—"

"Right," interrupted the big Dutchman. "In you get, and we'll be on our way then. I've been sitting around for long enough in this perishing rain!" He reached out with one foot and drew the boat to the bank. Waverly stepped in and sat down gingerly on a wet thwart as the man took a long pole and thrust off.

For a time, the man from U.N.C.L.E. watched the two identical lines of damp countryside, one receding, the other approaching, as the boatman poled them out into midstream with long, powerful strokes.

Then, feeling a little guilty because, after all, the man didn't have to oblige him at all, he tried to make conversation.

"It's very kind of you," he began. "Still… I don't suppose you get too many people asking to be ferried across at this time of the year!"

The man grunted.

"It was most fortunate for me," Waverly pursued, "that you just happened to be there at that time. You are yourself a fisherman, I imagine?" He looked expectantly at his pilot.

“Best not to talk,” the boatman said. “The less anyone knows about anyone else the better, eh?”

Waverly shrugged. The fellow seemed to be a bit of a boor. He stared for a while at the gray water sliding past the stem. Judging from the watermark on the pole, it could be no more than four or five feet deep.

When they were about two-thirds of the way across, the boatman stopped poling and allowed the punt to drift to a stand “Perhaps we’d better settle up now?” he suggested dourly. “Don’t want to hang about too much by the bank, do we? It may be all right for Willem on the other side of the island, where there’s nobody to see, but we have to be more careful. Anyway, I expect you’ll want to be off as quick as you can. Your lot always do.”

“Why… why, yes, by all means,” Waverly said, reaching for his wallet. “How much do I owe you?”

He wasn’t really thinking. He was cold and he was wet and he was miserable. He had had only a quarter of a chicken for lunch and that had soon vanished in the exertion of his five-mile walk. In his famished state, he could think only of getting back to his hotel—and to a large, hot meal!

The boatman had walked forward, rocking the flat-bottomed craft on the surface of the water. “One hundred guilders,” he said curtly, balancing the pole across the width of the punt and holding out his hand.

Perhaps, Waverly thought, counting notes into the callused palm, he would be able to find one of those splendid Indonesian restaurants open early; a selection from the famous *rijstafel* would just about fit the bill… twenty and ten makes thirty, and five is thirty-five… and talking about hills… “*A hundred guilders*!” he screeched suddenly, his hand in midair. “But that’s almost thirty dollars!”

The boatman stared at him impassively. He said nothing.

“Thirty dollars? For crossing less than a quarter of a mile of dead calm water? You must be out of your mind!”

“A hundred guilders. That’s the price.”

“But that’s monstrous! I wouldn’t dream of paying such a price! I absolutely refuse. I—”

“Look—the fare is paid,” the man said strangely. “This is extra for me. For waiting. For the weather. For whatever you like. But you either give me the money or I tip you into the water… ” He rocked the frail craft from side

to side threateningly. “You takes your choice and you pays the money,” he added with a crooked grin as he inverted the old saw.

Waverly was speechless with rage. “This is blackmail!” he stammered at last. “It is an outrage. I… I never had such a—”

“Shut up. If the cash was so important to you, you should have made sure Willem got you here earlier. You have had all day, after all. Come now—decide!”

Waverly was so angry he could hardly think straight. God knew what all that garbage meant! What the devil had this extortion to do with Willem—whoever he was? All the same, the boatman was a *very* big man—and he had already parted with nearly half the money. Also, even if he demanded to be taken back, he would be no better off; in fact, he would be back where he had started, with no means of crossing and thirty-five florins less in his pocket! He glanced at the oily surface of the water—it looked extremely cold!—and shuddered. Scowling, he counted out the rest of the money.

“There! That’s better!” The boatman was suddenly almost affable. He stuffed the notes into his hip pocket, took up the pole, and began punting the boat rapidly toward the bank.

“Will I be able to get a car?” Waverly growled a few minutes later. “I’m in a hurry—otherwise I should never have paid your outrageous price—and I want to go—”

“Don’t worry!” the giant interrupted. “Of course you’ll get a car. It’s all taken care of. You fuss too much.”

Waverly shrugged in his wet coat and fell silent. A final thrust of the pole had sent them gliding toward a narrow creek penetrating a thicket of alders at the water’s edge. Soundlessly, they slid in beneath the branches.

“You’ll have to give me a hand,” Waverly snapped. “There’s a bank here, it’s too steep and too wet and slippery to climb unaided.”

“I told you not to worry,” the boatman said—and indeed, as he spoke, arms reached down through the screen of leaves and hauled Waverly up and out of the boat. A few scrambling steps later, he was panting on top of the bank, staring at two men in heavy belted coats and soft hats.

“Come on if you want the car,” the taller of the two murmured. “It has already attracted enough attention as it is.” Taking Waverly’s arm, he drew him through the bushes toward a footpath running along one side of a drowned field.

“But I didn’t… ” Waverly glanced over his shoulder. The punt was already back in the open water, the tall figure of the boatman blurred by the clouds of drizzle gusting in from the island.

“Best not to talk,” the shorter man said.

Ten minutes and three fields later, they emerged from a belt of trees to find themselves at the edge of a country road. On the far side, a huge Minerva taxi stood in a side road half-hidden by a pile of stones.

The short man looked each way and then beckoned them across. He leaned in and spoke to a chauffeur in a peaked cap while his companion opened a door and ushered Waverly into the vast back seat. He sank down with a sigh of relief on the stained Bedford cord upholstery.

Before he could say anything, the door was slammed, the engine sprang to life, and the huge car surged forward on to the road.

Waverly twisted around and looked out the oval rear window. The two men, dwindling now in the approaching dusk, were standing in the middle of the road, each with a hand raised to the brim of his hat. He shrugged his damp shoulders and settled himself well back on the seat of the old Belgian car. He had stopped trying to figure it out… perhaps the exorbitant ferry fee included conducting him to a taxi. Yet nobody could have known he was coming; it was obviously not a regular ferry. In which case—how had there happened to *be* a taxi and men to take him to it?

He realized suddenly that he had given the driver no instructions. Would he go automatically to Amsterdam, because there was no civilized place in the other direction? Unable to recall the map, Waverly stared through the rain drops pockmarking the windows.

They were rattling along a narrow cobbled road that ran beside a canal. On either side, yellowing leaves drooped dispiritedly from the bare wet branches of trees.

Soon they passed a wooden bridge spanning the canal. At the corner of the timber superstructure, there was a three-finger signpost. The white-painted boards read: HARDERWIJK, ERMELE, AMSTERDAM… ELBURG, OLDEBROEK… and, on the one pointing across the canal: NUNSPEET.

Waverly exclaimed in annoyance. For the Amsterdam indicator was pointing back the way they had come!

He leaned forward to slide aside the glass partition separating him from the chauffeur. It refused to move. He tried again, harder. Still the panel

would not budge.

He rapped peremptorily upon the glass. But the stolid set of the driver's head remained unchanged. The peaked cap did not turn by as much as a hair's breadth.

Waverly began to feel alarmed. Perhaps the man was deaf. Suppose he was mad, even! Maybe the whole thing was some kind of kidnap setup…. Vaguely he recalled stories of doors that would not open from the inside, of gas pumped into the rear compartment from the chauffeur's compartment, through a speaking tube.

He stared around the huge, shabby car. There *was* a speaking tube, hooked to the armrest on the left-hand side!

Panicking, he grabbed the tarnished chrome door handle and jerked. There was an icy blast of wind as the heavy door flew open, letting in the rumble of the Minerva's suspension and the oily hiss of tires on the wet road. Feeling rather foolish, Waverly leaned out into the spray thrown up by the wheels and hauled the door shut.

A few minutes later, the taxi slowed down by a long red brick wall and turned into a lane at the far end of which there seemed to be some kind of junkyard. The driver braked to a halt, jumped out and opened Waverly's door. "Very well, Mynheer," he said. "The other party's waiting."

He jerked a thumb at three men in long green leather coats who were leaning against a decrepit truck in the shelter of the wall. One of them plucked a cigarette from his mouth, pitched it into a puddle filling a rut in the muddy lane, and lounged forward.

"You took your time!" he said in German. "We'd almost given you up."

"Jaap was late with the boat," the chauffeur said apologetically. "According to Hendrik, he never said why—just pushed off again to the island."

"Never mind. So long as the client's here… Okay then, Herr Bird-of-Passage—let's have your passport."

Bewildered, Waverly had climbed out of the car. More puzzled still, he looked now at the outstretched hand of the man in the leather coat. "Are you talking to me?" he asked.

"Look, don't mess around," the man said crossly. "I'm hardly likely to be asking for one from Willi here, now am I?"

"Yes, for God's sake do hurry, man," another member of the reception committee called from the truck. "We're half-frozen waiting here."

“You want my passport? My *passport*? Are you some kind of… of police patrol?”

“Police patrol he says! That’s a good one!” the man in the leather coat guffawed. “Of course we want your passport; you don’t think we fit you up with a new one and still leave you the old one, do you?”

“I haven’t the least idea what you’re talking about,” Waverly said.

There was a sudden silence. It was quite dark in the lane. A gust of wind shook a scatter of heavy raindrops from the bare branches overhead. Squelching in the mud, the other two men moved slowly up to Waverly and their companion. “*What* did you say?” one of them asked softly.

“I said I had no idea what the hell you were talking about,” he snapped. “And what’s more, I don’t care! All I want to do is get back to my hotel in Amsterdam. So if you’ll kindly permit my chauffeur to turn-”

“Amsterdam? Hotel? What are you *talking* about?” the man snarled—and then, struck by a thought, added, “What’s your name?”

“If it’s anything to you, my name is Waverly. And I assure you—”

“*Waverly*! You’re not Fleischmann?’ the chauffeur exclaimed blankly.

“Fleischmann? I never heard of him. I tell you—”

Waverly broke off with a gasp as he was seized from behind. Rough hands dragged his overcoat and jacket down over his arms, effectively pinioning his elbows. At the same time, the man who had first spoken reached out a hand and drew his passport from the exposed inner pocket. He flicked over the pages, scowling. “By God, he’ll telling the truth!” he said hoarsely.

“Of course I’m telling the truth, you cretin!” Waverly shouted, scarlet in the face and struggling. “This is an outrage! I warn you that my name is one to be conjured with; you’ll hear about this!”

“Be quiet, you!” the third man rapped out. “You mean it’s definitely not Fleischmann, Karl?”

“Apparently not. Come to think of it, doesn’t look like him.”

“Then who is it?”

“That, my friend, we shall have to find out.”

“Let me go this instant.” Waverly yelled. “You can’t go around roughing people up and taking their passports and abducting—”

Abruptly he choked on his words. The lane spun up and slashed him across the face as an enormous weight descended on his skull and the inside of his head exploded into a million incandescent stars.

Chapter 2

Solo Shrugs It Off

"AND I REMEMBERED nothing more," Waverly said sourly to his Chief Enforcement Officer, Napoleon Solo, three days later in New York, "until I woke up in this shop doorway at three o'clock in the morning."

"Wow!" Solo exclaimed. "That must have been some sap they slugged you with!"

Wincing slightly at the slang, his superior corrected him. "It was not the result of the—er—sap," he said stiffly. "There was the mark of a hypodermic on my forearm. Apparently I had been drugged."

"And held while they checked that you really were who you said you were—and that you weren't a sleeper fed in to blow their little setup!"

"Ours is said to be an alive and vital language, Mr. Solo," Waverly remarked with a pained expression. "Yet there are times…" He sighed and shook his gray head.

"Then they took you back to Amsterdam in the middle of the night and jettisoned you in the doorway of this jeweler's store?"

"In the Kalverstraat, yes. Apparently I was unable to give a satisfactory explanation of my presence there to two representatives of the law who chanced to pass by shortly after ward—I wasn't myself, you know—and I was—er—placed under surveillance for the remainder of the night."

"They slung you in the pokey!"

"Mr. Solo, *please*!… Of course, as soon as I was permitted to call my colleagues at Interpol, I was released. The Chief of Police was most apologetic. Most. But by the time we got around to making an investigation, naturally there was nothing left to see."

"You went straight back there with a team?"

"Well… almost. One of the more disagreeable aspects of the case was that, as you may recall, the whole thing started because I was hungry. You will also remember that at the time I was bludgeoned into insensibility, I

had still not eaten. With the result that, despite a severe headache, I was ravenous when I recovered consciousness at 3 A.M.

"I can imagine," Solo said, repressing a smile.

"Quite. And those fools of policemen refused to allow me to go to some respectable establishment and order a meal. I had to be content"—Waverly shuddered—"with a bag of fried potatoes, a cold soused herring, and a boiled sausage from an all-night stand before they locked me up. You can see, therefore, that before I set out on the following day I was obliged to cater extensively to the—er—inner man."

"Oh, absolutely," Solo said. He coughed and moved across Waverly's office to the window.

Few employees have had the opportunity of hearing their bosses explain how they were knocked on the head. But when the boss was Waverly and when the explanation included a complaint that the police arresting him had refused to allow him to go to a nightclub on the way to jail to order a meal… Solo took refuge in another fit of coughing and attempted to master his facial expressions.

"You found nothing, I suppose," he said after a moment, staring out at the tall tower of the U.N. building. It was raining in New York, too, and there was a strong wind gusting across the East River, stammering the windows in their frames.

"Nothing," Waverly echoed behind him. "Nobody had ever seen or heard of the boatman or anybody like him. Nobody had ever seen the Minerva taxi—which is odd, because there's no old-car cult in Holland, and thus a mid-thirties monster like this would be bound to attract attention, you'd think. Not a soul could be found, naturally, who had ever seen three men in green leather coats… and that was about it. We did locate the place where the taxi turned off the road. But there were so many tracks and it was so muddy in the lane that the police were not able to identify any one set."

He dragged from the pocket of his shapeless tweed jacket a brand-new meerschaum pipe he had bought in Amsterdam, jammed it between his teeth, and sauntered over to join Solo at the window.

"All right then, Mr. Solo," he said, staring out into the rain. "What do you make of it all? Cook me up a theory to fit these facts."

The agent turned and looked at him. "Unless it's a trick question, I should say it's a straightforward case of mistaken identity," he replied. "There's this little organization all set up and waiting for somebody—the

man to take him from the island to the mainland, the liaison men to direct him to the waiting taxi, the men in the truck ready to supply false papers… and from there on down."

"I agree. But why pick on me?"

"I guess they were expecting somebody from the island, somebody they didn't know too well by sight, and you turned up around the right time. I imagine you inadvertently gave the right password or innocently supplied the correct answer to a coded question. Something like that."

"That's exactly what I thought," Waverly agreed. "I said, in German, 'Good day. I seem to have missed my way. Could you take me across.'"

"Ah. That was probably the opening gambit."

"I think it must have been. For he showed no surprise at all. Nor did he answer the question. He simply asked me where I was from, and when I replied absently—I was thinking of something else, you know—that I was from Section One, he got straight up and pulled in the boat."

"That's it! That's it! The approach in German—and then, by an extraordinary coincidence, the right code word when you say Section One!"

"I expect you're right. Because, come to think of it, I spoke in German; yet he replied in Dutch. And that's the way it went on—German from my side, Dutch from his. I can understand Dutch, you see, but I don't actually speak it. One surmises that this was another part of the arrangement, the twin language thing."

Waverly paused, sucked noisily on the empty meerschaum, and reached into his pocket for a tobacco pouch. "Well, that's all right, as far as it goes," he continued, "but how do you see the thing in its broader aspects?"

"As a continuing organization, I think," Solo said after he had considered for a moment. "Rather than as a one-shot job, I mean."

"Why do you say that?"

"Several reasons. The boatman said he expected you wanted to be off as quickly as possible and added, 'Your lot *always* do.' Secondly, nobody knew the taxi, although it was easily identifiable. If it *had* been a one-shot job, they could have used a local car and bluffed it out—but a mystery auto spells organization to me! Third, all that insistence on 'it's best not to talk.' A hastily improvised organization would risk nothing by talk; but one that had subsequent tasks of the same nature to carry out… well, obviously the less known—and said—the better!"

Waverly nodded. "Yes, that's all good reasoning," he said.

“As to what such an organization *is*… well, my guess would be that it exists to smuggle undesirables—or contraband goods, even—into Holland. Judging from what you said, the mysterious Willem lands the clients on the north coast of the island, and they then walk across and meet your boatman on the south. And he in turn hands them on to the taxi and the men in the truck.”

“Going where?” Waverly asked softly. “If they’re already in, why would they need to be squired further?”

“Squired further…? Oh—I see what you mean.” Solo was silent for a moment, and then he said slowly, “Long, green leather coats, did you say? Of a particular dark bottle green?”

Waverly nodded, stuffing tobacco into the vast bowl of the pipe.

“Then that suggests northern Germany, Westphalia, to me. There is a certain type of German, especially among the older ones, who automatically wears a coat like that in winter. Particularly in places like Hamburg, Bremen, Oldenburg, and so on.”

“Precisely.”

“In which case, it argues that Holland was only an interim stage on the route. That also fits in, of course, with the fact that the ‘client’ was to be issued with a fake passport *after* he had entered the country. If the three men were Germans, the passport would be required for crossing the *German* border.”

Waverly tamped the tobacco down with his thumb and put the meerschaum back between his teeth. “That’s the way I see it,” he affirmed.

“This also takes care of the taxi. Suppose it is in fact a German vehicle which only appears in Holland when there is a job on, when they fit it out with false Dutch plates. Well, there’s no wonder the locals haven’t seen it! And then, when the passenger has been duly equipped with spurious German documents, they merely change back to the genuine plates and drive across the border!”

“Exactly. There are two dozen small frontier posts between Emmen and Enschede, any one of which they could have been heading for when they realized I was the wrong man. They could use a different one every time, to minimize the risk of someone noticing something.”

It was Solo’s turn to nod. “Yes, it all figures,” he said. “Even the client’s name—Fleischmann, did you say it was?—is German. I’d guess it’s a big-time outfit too; your boat man said something to the effect that the fare was

paid, didn't he? That implies large-scale operations to me—you pay the fare before you start, and everything's taken care of, just like on a travel-agency tour! No doubt that was why your ferryman turned on the screws and asked for the extra: Willem's man was for some reason late and, being a fugitive as it were, could scarcely refuse the demand!"

"Where do you think Willem's man came from?" Waverly asked.

"Looking at the map, I imagine the boys bring illegal immigrants from America—or anywhere overseas, for that matter—into the Federal German Republic. Probably the clients are stowed away or in some other manner smuggled aboard boats docking at Amsterdam. And then, when they get there, instead of walking down the gangway, they drop over the blind side, as it were, make for the other bank of the Noordzeekanaal, cross the neck of land dividing the canal from the Ijsselmeer, and pick up Willem there."

"But why should they bother to cross an inland sea, traverse an island, and come back to the mainland again when they could just as well have gone around the edge of the sea in the first place?"

"Simply because of the relative danger, I guess. A man without papers, a man on the run, is a natural target in a seaport, on the streets of a capital city, on the main roads—most of which are patrolled by police. But if you take him to a desolate stretch of country that's underpopulated and put him in touch with the people who can give him papers *there*, well, you're halving the chances of detection right away, aren't you?"

"I thought strangers were supposed to stand out even more in country areas," Waverly objected.

"If they're going to stay, to live there, sure. But not passing through. With a bit of luck, nobody'll see them at all."

"You may be right." Waverly went back to his desk and skimped into his chair. He tossed the unlit pipe onto a pile of folders. "In any case, we shall soon know. Are you done with that Hawaiian forgery thing yet?"

"Not quite. We have to make a digest of the depositions and—"

"Hand it over to Rodrigues," Waverly interrupted.

"To Rodrigues? I'm afraid I don't quite—" Solo began.

"He's capable of handling it, isn't he?" the head of Section One demanded irritably. "All the stuff's in, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. Slade and Miss Dancer have to file a report from Manila, but otherwise everything's there. The report'll be in tonight in any case."

"Excellent. Hand it over, then."

“Very well, Mr. Waverly. Did… did you have some thing else, something urgent, for me?” Solo inquired, his dark brows raised in puzzlement.

“Yes, I did,” his chief said crisply. “I want you to fly to Amsterdam tonight and find out all about Willem…”

Chapter 3

A Question of Etiquette!

NAPOLEON SOLO was incredulous. “You can’t be serious!” he said in dismay. “You don’t mean… officially? Not as an assignment… for the Command?”

“Of course I’m serious,” Waverly said testily. “And for whom else would it be an assignment, if not for the Command?”

Solo gulped. Perhaps the old man was going out of his mind. Maybe the blow on his head had been harder than anybody realized. He would have to play it very cool if he was to prevent the head of Section One from making a fool of himself.

“Mr. Waverly,” he said seriously, “we go into action if there’s a possibility that the balance of world power may be threatened. We can operate secretly within the boundaries of member states if there’s a chance their stability is endangered—in a currency coup, for example. We can work supranationally, when an international conspiracy such as THRUSH poisons or weakens the relationship between states.”

“Well?”

“Well… well, surely… I mean… Well, we couldn’t go into Holland to investigate this little nest of smugglers or whatever it is. We wouldn’t have the right to.”

“Why not?”

“Why, because… look—I understand you’re sore at being roughed up by these characters. It’s natural to want to hit back. And our conversation of a few minutes ago was an interesting exercise in deduction. But Mr. Waverly, that’s a very different thing from ordering an official investigation by the whole U.N.C.L.E. apparatus! Surely a setup such as we envisaged—even if we were right about it—would be entirely an affair for the Dutch and German police departments working in liaison? Perhaps for their counterintelligence or special services. At the very most for Interpol.”

“But not for us, you think?”

“Well, good heavens no!” Solo burst out desperately. “We have no mandate for that sort of thing. We’d be interfering in the internal affairs of a member country. If we did it with out their knowing and got found out, there’d be hell to pay! And I could never justify asking for their help, on the other hand, if they themselves hadn’t called *us* in. You must know that, sir.”

Waverly was chuckling. “And you are quite right, of course, my dear Mr. Solo,” he said urbanely. “There are, however, some facts you do not yet know.”

Solo subsided into a chair. What was coming next?

“You’re thinking too much about me—the man who was taken by mistake—and not enough about the man who *should* have been there,” Waverly said.

“Fleischmann

“Yes, Mr. Solo. Fleischmann. I’ve checked up, and I think I know who he is—and if I’m right, then you are wrong in thinking the good Willem seeks his clients on the east of Amsterdam docks! For Fleischmann would have come from the north.”

“The north!” Solo echoed in astonishment.

Waverly nodded. “From Denmark. Outside the North Friesian islands, and then inside the East and West Friesians and through one of the giant sluice bridges beneath that extraordinary road causeway that blanks off the mouth of the old Zuider Zee. Once through there, it’s only a matter of forty-five kilometers or so before you hit Oost Flevoland.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Waverly lifted his pipe from the folders on his desk and stuck it once again between his teeth. He raised the top folder, opened it, and took out a sheet of onionskin.

“Fleischmann, Ralph,” he read. “German national sentenced to six years’ imprisonment for his part in a huge company swindle in Copenhagen. He was being transferred to a maximum-security prison last week when the van in which he was traveling was ambushed near Kolding, in Jutland. He hasn’t been seen since.”

Solo whistled. “And you think…?”

“The team who got him out are tough boys,” Waverly continued. “A guard was killed when the van was rammed, and another—the man to whom Fleischmann was hand cuffed—was seriously injured. They couldn’t

unlock the cuffs, so they amputated the man's hand—just hacked it off while he was still conscious, so that they could get Fleischmann away."

"But that's barbarous! And this was Willem's client?"

"I think it was. Obviously there'd be a close watch on places like Esbjerg, Malmo, Kiel, Cuxhaven, Lubeck, and even Oslo after a deal like that. But who'd think of looking for him on the Ijsselmeer?"

"I see what you mean. But what would have happened when he did arrive and found out that you'd inadvertently taken his place beforehand?"

"I don't think he ever did find out," Waverly said. "I think the reason for his lateness, and for Willem's apparent inefficiency, lies in this…" He picked another piece of paper from the file and read:

"'A converted torpedo-recovery boat, 82 feet long and equipped with sleeping accommodations for six, broke in half and sank instantly when it was rammed by a tanker in ballast between the island of Terschelling and the Dutch coast last night. There was light fog at the time of the collision, but the forward lookout aboard the tanker stated that the smaller craft was carrying no navigation lights. It is thought that there were at least three people on the TRB, though neither survivors nor bodies have yet been found. Dutch marine authorities said they had no knowledge of such a craft operating in the area of the Friesian Islands.'"

Waverly laid the paper down and closed the file. "That news report was dated the day of my—er—abduction," he said. "That is, the collision would have occurred on the previous night—though none of the men who passed me along the escape chain in the afternoon would have heard of it."

He opened another folder and spread several sheets of onion skin on the polished surface of the desk before him.

"I'll draw your attention to three more apparently unrelated items," he said. "First, one of the courtesy carbons we get every day from the CIA. This one is dated three weeks ago and it says, quote: 'We have now received confirmation that Colonel Stulkas, the U. S. army flyer-turned-pacifist who vanished from his mess near Stuttgart a week ago, is in a Russian-staffed officers' club on the outskirts of Dresden.' Unquote.

"Second, an Interpol memorandum stating that a certain Ferenc Sujic, who robbed a bank at Plzen, in Czechoslovakia, of close to half a million dollars last month, was thought to be on one of the Peloponnesian Islands in the Aegean. It adds," Waverly commented dryly, "that he was believed to

have spent several days in Liechtenstein on the way! No doubt to bank some of the money and form a tax-free company or two!

"And the final exhibit is a newspaper cutting. This is a story that has, as it were, a beginning but no end—yet— whereas both the others were complete, inasmuch as you knew where the subject came from and where he went. Here, though—read it for yourself."

The agent took the slip of newsprint and read,

> PARIS, Tuesday—Gerard Mathieu, "The Man They Can't Convict," has got away with it again! The stocky nightclub owner, summoned to appear before an examining magistrate today on charges concerning a gang shooting in Montmartre last month, had fled just before detectives from the Police Judiciare arrived at his plush avenue Marceau apartment.
>
> A spokesman from the quai des Orfevres told me tonight that although they had thrown a ring around Paris immediately, Mathieu—against whom further charges involving extortion and drugs may soon be lodged—seemed to have escaped the net.
>
> "We have every hope," the spokesman said, "that the malefactor will nevertheless be safely under lock and key within forty-eight hours." Underworld sources close to Mathieu were openly scornful of this claim this evening. I was told definitely that the wanted man had already left metropolitan France. Further rumors current in Montmartre hint that "The Man They Can't Convict" may be back among his own people in Corsica—and officials at Nice Airport confirmed that an unidentified private aircraft flying very high crossed the Cote d'Azur in a south easterly direction late this afternoon.
>
> If Mathieu has in fact gone to ground in Corsica, informed opinion is that he will never be found by the mainland police. Born forty-eight years ago in Bastia, he is known—despite his record—to have become something of a hero to the people of the island.

Solo handed the clipping back without comment. He looked at his chief with raised brows.

Waverly was smiling, a benevolent owl behind his glasses. “Four movements,” he said. “One south and east—from Denmark through Holland to Germany. One eastward, conveying someone behind the so-called Iron Curtain. Another west and then southeast, bringing someone *from* behind the Curtain. And finally one supposedly south, from Paris to Corsica. A swindler, a deserter, a bankrobber, and a gang boss. What have they all in common, Mr. Solo?”

“That they’re all on the run, I suppose—three of them from the law and the defector from the U. S. army authorities.”

“Nothing more?”

Solo thought for a moment. “I guess not,” he said at last.

“Mr. Solo, you disappoint me. This suggests to me—taken in conjunction with my own experience—that there exists a highly organized and efficient escape network spreading all over Europe, that it is nonpolitical in conception (witness the two-way traffic *vis-a-vis* the Eastern bloc), and that persons availing themselves of the service can be transported in speed and apparent comfort from any European country to any other.”

Solo looked dubious. Beneath brown eyes, the set of his cleft chin was stubborn. “If you don’t mind my saying so, sir, I think you’re deducing a lot from a very few facts,” he said. “And even assuming you’re correct, I still don’t see…”

“That we have any right to investigate such a network?”

“Yes, sir.”

Waverly joined together the tips of his fingers and sup ported the soft underside of his jaw on the steeple so formed. “By the book, of course, you are right,” he said. “But I have a hunch; I’m certain I’m right—facts or no facts. And that being so—”

“Oh, look, Mr. Waverly,” Solo broke in agitatedly, “we can’t… we simply cannot go in there and stir things up! It’s none of our business.”

“Agreed, agreed. But consider one thing, Mr. Solo. Suppose for the sake of argument that such a network does exist and suppose, further, that its organization is highly efficient—would not such an apparatus be a natural target for a takeover bid, as it were, from THRUSH?”

“You mean THRUSH could infiltrate it, make a satrap of it?”

“Exactly. And if THRUSH did find such a ready-made form of assistance at hand and did take it over, would that not be our business?”

Solo sighed. “I guess it would,” he said reluctantly. “But…”

“Yes, Mr. Solo?” Waverly was grinning impishly.

“But we’d have to be very sure before we took any action.”

“And that,” Waverly cried triumphantly, “is all I’m asking you to do—go to Europe to make sure!”

His Chief Enforcement Officer sighed again. “Yes, but it isn’t as simple as that, is it, sir?”

“What do you mean? Surely it’s better to *prevent* something bad happening than to wait for it to happen and then act afterward? And don’t forget THRUSH could not only take the network over: they could also use it as a kind of recruiting channel—diverting the more clever and less scrupulous of the crooks using it toward their own ranks!”

“Look,” Solo said quietly, “it’s all very well for us to talk of prevention—but how? What machinery are we going to use? There’s a certain protocol in these matters. Since I’m going to have to work undercover, without the knowledge of the authorities, how do I tell them about the organization, if I find it does exist, without revealing that U.N.C.L.E. has been poaching on their private property?”

Waverly blew bubbles through the damp tobacco in his pipe. “I admit that if I’m proved right, it will lead to certain—ah—problems of etiquette,” he said carefully. “We should have to evolve some formula whereby we appear to have— er—come by the information honestly. And then give them the chance of clearing it up themselves, handing it over to Interpol, or asking us to do it for them. Obviously, as you say, we couldn’t just barge in and mop it up. But let’s leave that until later; we can deal with it if and when the problem arises.

For the moment, the important thing is to find out if there is such an organization, how it works, and whether any approach, overt or covert, has been made to it by THRUSH.”

“All the same,” Napoleon Solo began, shaking his head, I’m not at all happy about our position with regard to—”

Waverly held up his hand. “My suggestion has now become an order, Mr. Solo,” he said firmly.

Chapter 4

“Don’t Call Us…!”

YELLOW LEAVES veneered the sidewalk and lay thickly on the surface of the canal running beside it. From a second floor window of the red brick police headquarters on the other side of the road, Napoleon Solo stared through the bare branches of the trees at a row of old houses across the water. Farther along, by a bridge carrying a main road over the canal, the trees had been cut down and there was a line of cars parked with their fenders projecting over the unprotected bank. The sky was gray and a thin, persistent rain was falling.

Behind the agent, a paneled door opened, and a thickset man in a brown suit bustled into the room. “Very sorry to have you wait, Mynheer Solo,” he said, laying down a pile of folders on the carved desk, “but it is well to have all the facts checked, and so I thought it best to verify that my colleagues in other departments have no more information than we have here.”

“That’s quite all right,” Solo smiled. “It’s very good of you to go to all this trouble on our account anyway.”

Before coming to Amsterdam, he had won his chief’s reluctant permission to seek the help of the authorities. If they ignored Waverly’s own personal experience and concentrated on the *international* aspect of the supposed escape network, Solo had argued, they could legitimately ask police in the various countries if they had heard of such an organization and, if so, what evidence there was for presuming it did exist. Then, if the consensus was positive—but not unless— they could consider the second stage of Waverly’s plan: finding out secretly how it ticked. He had come to Holland first simply because that was where the trail had started. But the results so far were neutral to negative.

In the somber room papers rustled. Outside, waves from an empty sightseeing launch agitated the leaves floating on the canal. There was a

stream of cyclists pouring across the bridge now. It must be nearly lunchtime.

The Dutchman cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said, “well it seems to be that we have very little here what you call the hard facts. Certain informers have reported to us that there does exist such an organization. But we have not in this country suffered any escapes recently of a nature that could have used it. Moreover, when our officers pressed the informers to give details, none could supply any. It does appear that the organization is either very secret indeed… or that it is an imagination altogether.”

Solo had turned his back to the window and was sitting on the broad radiator below the sill. “Nothing came to light— nothing of a positive nature, that is—after the—er—contretemps that befell my colleague, Mr. Waverly?” he asked. They had agreed to suppress the fact that this had been their point of departure, although obviously they could not play it down too much, since Waverly himself had put the Dutch police and Interpol on the trail the day after it had happened.

“Nothing definite,” the Dutchman agreed. “We have still not found traces of the Minerva taxi, the boatman called Jaap, the man Willem, or three supposed Germans in green leather coats. But as this country may have been only an interim stage in the process, perhaps this does not surprise.”

“Do you know if Mr. Waverly’s deductions were correct? Have you found out anything more about the collision at sea?”

“Oh, yes”—the police chief opened more files, rustled more paper —“the boat was salvaged. It was an old German naval craft converted. They found one body on it: it was Fleischmann, all right. But there was no sign of the mysterious Willem or any third man.”

“Still, it looks as though it was to have been a link in the chain that Waverly inadvertently joined, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps, perhaps.”

“Apart from the details that Waverly happened across, your informants can’t offer any concrete leads at all, then?”

The Dutchman sighed heavily. “I am afraid not. It is difficult, you see. Since there have not been any spectacular escapes from here, we have really no reason to investigate such an organization or to verify if it exists. This was just by a chance of cross-referencing that we turned up these few points I have quoted to you. There may be more allusions to it buried in transcripts

of evidence or examination of witnesses… but under what subject do we look for it in the files?"

"I do see your problem," Solo said. "To sum up, then—we can say that it is rumored among police informers that an escape organization exists but that none of them can supply positive facts to support the rumor?"

"Precisely, Mynheer Solo."

"And nothing has occurred within police jurisdiction in this country from which the existence of such a network could be deduced?"

"Nothing." The policeman was ferreting about in one of the folders. He gave a grunt of satisfaction and held up a piece of paper covered in typed notes. "There is just a small thing," he said. "It may not be important. But it says here that the informer who was most positive about the thing had just returned from Vienna."

"A tale from the Vienna woods. It's not much of a lead," Solo said ruefully. "But it's better than no lead, I guess. Go east, young man!"

The rented car emerged from the leafless forest and swooped downhill to the capital after dark. Solo's first impression of Vienna was that there were more lights there than he had ever seen in a city before.

Their brilliance mapped the city against the night, glittering along the main streets, garlanding squares and parks and promenades. Shops, theaters, hotels, and public buildings were ablaze with light—and what made the spectacle more interesting still was that it was all of the same kind. Instead of the usual jungle of red, blue and green neon, flashing advertisements, yellow sodium lamps, and floods, the place seemed to be lit with ordinary white bulbs everywhere—a firmament of silver stars coruscating against the sky in the cold, crisp air.

Solo left the car at a multistory automat garage in the old Markplatz, where it was whisked aloft and stacked in a numbered niche somewhere far above. He crossed the square and booked in at the Hotel Ambassador.

There was a full restaurant service on each floor, and a train of white-jacketed waiters with trolleys flung open the tall, narrow double doors of his room and served him dinner at an eighteenth-century marquetry table. There were two wash-basins and two tubs in the bathroom, the wallpaper was in gold and white stripes, and the drapes were in gold velour. Solo slept between apricot-colored merino blankets and drank hot chocolate for

breakfast, feeling absurdly like the romantic lead in an outdated Hollywood movie.

Later, in a glass and steel office overlooking the Karntnerstrasse near the old cathedral, he was brought face to face with the present day.

The small, secret, and highly efficient research unit—which dated from four-power occupation days and was attached to central police headquarters—was run by a statistician, a one time market research genius who had held a chair in psephology and had been seconded to this post at the insistence of the Ministry of the Interior.

Watching his lined, intent face as his eyes flicked among the cards of a rotary index, admiring the deft shuffling of his fingers as he sorted those he had selected into categories, the agent was imbued with confidence. If there was anything to be found out about Waverly's escape network, he felt, this was the place in which he would find it. This quick thinking little man with the goatee would come up with the answers—if there were indeed any answers to find.

"I must compliment you, Herr Doktor, on the efficacy of your system," Solo' said. "I almost pity the criminals who have such an organization to beat!"

The little man smiled absently. "You are too kind," he said in faultless English. "I am afraid we are not as rapid as we would like. Now that I have the cards, I must ask you to wait four minutes while we program the computer. After that, we shall see…"

And in precisely four minutes, with a soft thud and a discreet hiss of compressed air, a container dropped into a basket by his desk from the tube leading to the computer room somewhere far below.

He unscrewed the top and removed the cylinder of paper inside. "Ah, yes, of course," he said. "Typical of the computer! These machines will compartmentalize! One can perhaps have too much of categorization, of placing things each under its proper heading. Still…

"The computer lists five different species of escape network existing in this country… Assisted Movement Operations, as it quaintly calls them…"

"Five!" Solo exclaimed in astonishment.

"Oh, yes. Five. Section One, (a), positive, is an organization for taking willing undercover agents east of the so called Iron Curtain. It operates rather clumsily, beneath the umbrella of one of these student cultural exchange groups. And it is of course financed by the CIA. Section One, (b),

positive, is a similar network for infiltrating East European operatives into countries on this side of the Curtain."

"Run, I suppose, by the KGB?"

The little man nodded. He ticked off two paragraphs at the top of the paper with a gold ballpoint carrying a black tassel and continued, "Section Two (a), negative, is run by a different branch of the KGB. It occupies itself with the ferrying of *un*willing persons from West to East—and it is, not to put too fine a point upon it, an agency for the kidnapping and drugging of scientists, military defectors or other personnel whom they would like to see back, for one reason or another, at secret police headquarters over there.

"Section Two, (b), also negative, attempts with less success to do the same thing in reverse. Except that instead of running it themselves, the CIA employs a group of *barbouzes*—unemployed ex-paras from Algeria.

"I need not tell you the kind of customers these networks have—Burgess, Philby, Blake, the East German security chief who defected and was kidnapped and taken back again, the Israeli spy who was found drugged in a trunk in Rome airport, that French colonel who was abducted in Munich and delivered, bound and gagged, in a van in Paris, the Chinese legation people from the Netherlands—all of these, even if they didn't necessarily pass through Austria, used one of the networks which exist here."

"You don't mean they are exclusively Austrian organizations?"

"No, no. Just that because they have branches here, as it were, they thus appear on our computer programs."

"I see," Solo said. "And what about the fifth category, Herr Doktor?"

The man with the goatee looked again at his paper. "Ah, yes. Now this… this appears to he rather a different matter. Let me see…Section Three, (a), positive… It just says, and I quote, 'a nameless, noncommitted and nonaligned commercial organization set up to convey malefactors illegally and secretly across frontiers; an escape chain similar to those underground networks passing along allied escapees during the war; an organization for removing wrongdoers from the jurisdiction of those who condemn them.'"

"Does it say anything about how it works or who runs it?"

The Austrian looked at the paper again, frowned, pushed his glasses up on to his high forehead, and frowned again. He turned the paper over, as though he might find on its blank back an answer to the problem puzzling

him. And finally, shaking his head, he said unbelievingly, “But no. Nothing at all. It is amazing, but we seem to have no information whatever on this network!”

“But it does exist?” Solo pursued.

“Exist? Oh, yes—it exists well enough. It spirited Hans Preisser and Otto Erlich away to Madrid only last week, despite the fact that the entire police force was looking for them after they had absconded with the funds of an insurance company.”

“Exist?” the police captain in Madrid repeated. “Certainly not. There is no such organization, and I am in a position to explain to you that if it did exist, we should assuredly have laid its working bare and apprehended the miscreants operating it. They would be safely incarcerated in our jails! Yet there are no such persons imprisoned in Spain—you may visit the cells and see for yourself. It follows, therefore, that there can be no such organization.”

“One has heard, nevertheless, of a certain senor Preisser and another—a senor Erlich— who are rumored to have arrived last week from Austria…”

“There are always rumors in a capital city,” the officer said.

“Clearly. Yet these particular rumors would appear to be well founded, inasmuch as the immigration authorities revealed to a foreign journalist—”

“Foreign newspaper reports frequently malign this country when the facts show the true picture to be far from dark. It is doubtless a matter of the language difference.”

“The language difference?”

“Things become distorted in translation,” the Spaniard said blandly. He flicked a speck of dust from the polished belt whose shoulder straps crossed his spotless olive-green uniform. “If it should happen,” he added carefully, “that this man—Preisser, did you say his name was?—and his companion should chance to be in this country, then it must be assumed that they entered legally, by one of the routes. Had they not done so, as I have already pointed out, they would have been discovered and the clandestine agents who brought them arrested.”

“… And there are no such people under arrest. Sure, I know.” Solo stared through the window. It was ten o’clock at night. Under the chestnut trees in the brightly lit *avenida* below, the crowds were strolling—shopping,

pausing for a drink at a sidewalk cafe, gossiping with friends, or merely promenading to see and be seen. He drew a deep breath and tried again.

"Captain," he began, "if we might for the sake of argument, just for the moment and purely as a hypothesis, assume that two such illegal immigrants had in fact been smuggled into your country, how exactly would your undoubtedly efficient counterintelligence services start to—"

He broke off as the officer rose to his feet, an elegant hand upraised. "You must forgive me, senor Solo"—his smile was charming, a flash of white teeth in the tanned face—"but I cannot officially entertain such theories. We deal only in facts here. We cannot permit ourselves to make any such wild assumptions."

"But surely you could at least explain how a hypothetical—"

"You must excuse me, senor. I am desolated, but we can help you no further."

If the Spanish authorities were reluctant to admit the presence of an organization whose members were not yet behind bars, Napoleon Solo found no trace of this official reticence in Turin.

He called at an address not far from the Corso Alessandro, where a special branch of the Italian police allied with the S.I.D., the Defense Department, had made its headquarters, and asked to see the man in charge.

The Commendatore was an old friend—a huge man, fat and friendly, with a luxuriant black moustache sprouting above a sharkskin suit.

"But of course it exist, this organization!" he exclaimed when Solo put his usual question. "It has been working for some time now—maybe one year, maybe two. Many times we have been give the tipoff—raid this club, be at this house at this hour, search that apartment, go to a warehouse. But always it is nothing that happen. Each trail is a death's end."'

"A dead end," Solo corrected. "But if the network is so secret—if it is one hundred percent impossible to contact it— then how the devil do the crooks using it approach the organization and explain that they wish to use it?"

"I think the shoe is upon the other leg, signor Solo. I think—I am not sure, and there may be exceptions—but I think the person wishing to get away is being contacted by the organization and offered an escape for a certain sum. This way, they are avoiding a time waste with small fries who do not have enough money to tempt them."

“I see. And even if you can find out nothing about the operation or how it works, Commendatore, you are absolutely certain, are you, that it really does exist?”

“But of course,” the fat man said, dabbing his neck with a vast handkerchief. Although it was winter, and the central heating was set very high, the outside temperature was 81 degrees. “We know of several cases where people have use it. I give you one example: you remember the men from THRUSH we have capture last year after that mysterious affair of the hologram at Buronzo?”[1]

“I certainly do,” Solo said grimly. He had good reason to!

“Well, there have been a jail break at Milano, and three of them have escape.”

“And they got out of the country using this organization? THRUSH operatives?”

The Commendatore nodded. “Others have use it also,” he said. “We do not think it is a THRUSH affair. It was convenient for them at the time and so they use it. But that is all.”

“It’s a very interesting all,” Solo said. “Thank you very much.”

Superintendent Rambouillet sat behind his desk in a dusty office near the Palais de Justice three floors above the Seine. His eyes were watering and his nose was red. He had a streaming cold, and he was feeling very sorry for himself. Across the room, Solo had taken up what was becoming his customary position, leaning against the windowsill. Behind him, rain fell from a gray sky on the Latin Quarter.

“We got a line on Mathieu quite by chance,” Rambouillet was saying. “He got through the cordon in a dust cart.”

“A dust cart!”

“Yes—one of those refuse collectors’ trucks that are the same the world over, the kind they empty the dustbins into. They must have had a spare set of overalls ready and he simply joined the team. After all, who’s going to pay any attention to the dustmen?”

“I see what you mean.”

“Naturally, they couldn’t go far. They had to transfer to some other vehicle before they left the outskirts of Paris, or else the dust cart would have become too noticeable. As it was, they took too much of a risk using it, because that’s how we got onto them: someone noticed that the truck was

an old one—a model the Public Health Department had stopped using some years ago. But what the hell, they were through our cordon before they had to change cars, so they were home and dry."

"You got a line on the car he changed into?"

"It was a beat-up delivery van, actually. Yes, we did. They took the autoroute, and we can trace them to a place just beyond Avallon. After that, the trail goes cold—but there is a small private airfield between Saulieu and Changy, in the Morvan. Bel-Air, I think it's called. My guess is that they changed cars at Avallon and then took a plane for Corsica at Bel-Air."

"The guy's definitely in Corsica, is he?"

"Without a doubt," Rambouillet said mournfully. He sniffed and reached out his hand toward a tin of antiflu tablets on the desk. "I wouldn't mind being there myself at this minute," he added. "This perishing winter…"

Solo grinned. "No clues to pick up in the dust cart or the van?"

The superintendent produced a sodden handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket and blew his nose violently. "No," he said. "The funny thing is, we couldn't find a single trace of either of them. Nobody has seen them, nobody knows where they are. Which means the whole team can't have gone to Corsica—some of them were evidently left behind to tidy up."

"So it was a highly organized deal, then?"

"Of course it was highly organized. You don't slip through a number one priority cordon by chance!"

"Sure. You believe this inter-European escape deal exists, then?"

"Believe it? I know it, monsieur Solo!" Rambouillet placed two villainous-looking green pills on his tongue and gulped water noisily from a glass by the telephone. "That is not to say, of course, that every person who flees from the law, every smuggler who crosses a frontier without having his passport stamped, is a client of these people. But certain— shall we say important?—escapes have definitely been arranged by them."

"Including Mathieu's?"

"Including Mathieu's. And that of Berthelot, who escaped from Fresnes after killing a warder. And those of Vanezzi and Ponchartrain. And of course that of Paschkov, whom I we had arrested and promised to extradite to Moscow. Very embarrassing, that!"

"Do they have anything in common, all these?" Solo asked. "I mean, can you tell at once whether an escape is an organization plan or simply a

one-shot job, privately organized?”

Rambouillet rose to his feet and walked over to join Solo at the window. Beyond the quai des Orfevres, the wash from a barge rolled slowly outward to fragment the dun reflections of the trees along the Left Bank. Traffic, shiny in the rain, swooped toward the Pont Royal above the parapet. The superintendent sighed, and blew his nose again.

“I cannot tell you whether the organization jobs have anything in common or not,” he said finally. “Or at least, yes—one thing I can tell you: they have this in common… that we have been able to find out nothing about any of them. Nothing at all! No abandoned vehicles, no discarded clothes, no suspicious purchases in stores. Nothing. I have men infiltrated into every big-time racket in the country, monsieur Solo; I have a list of *indics*—of informers—that is the envy of my colleagues in Berlin and Rome. But from none of these people can I receive even so much as a whisper concerning the makeup of this network, the names of its members, the way it works, how to get in touch with it, anything.”

“But that’s incredible,” Solo said.

“It is incredible. I agree. In the underworld, as you well know, there is always gossip. Jealousy or envy or greed or revenge inevitably leads somebody to talk. Sometimes. But not here. Every avenue leading to this organization is blocked.”

“At least you can admit that it exists and that it baffles you! And that’s more than our colleagues beyond the Pyrenees are prepared to do.”

“Ah, but you see, you have to take into account the Spanish character,” Rambouillet said. “They are a proud people, anxious not to lose face, and it is perhaps understandable that they prefer to ignore officially a problem until they can announce it has been solved.”

“All the same, I can’t see why—”

“One of their own proverbs sums up their attitude in this case rather neatly,” the superintendent interrupted. “in Spanish, it says, ‘*No creo en brujas—pero que las hay, las hay!*’”

“Which, being translated, means

“Freely translated, that means roughly, ‘Me, I don’t believe in witches… but as far as their existence is concerned—oh, they exist all right!’”

Napoleon Solo spoke to Waverly on the ultrashort-wave transmitter hidden in a false chimney above the apartment of U.N.C.L.E.‘s man in Paris.

“It seems,” he said reluctantly, “that there definitely is such an organization—and there the story ends.”

“I do not follow you, Mr. Solo.” Waverly’s voice crackled irritably from a speaker concealed in a bookcase. “Please be explicit.”

“There appears to be an organization, strictly commercial and apolitical, which arranges for people to pass clandestinely from one country to another. It does not seem to effect the actual escapes—that is to say it won’t spring a guy from jail. But once he is sprung, it’ll get him away. It’s never failed yet, and it leaves no clues.”

“Ha! So I was right! Proceed, Mr. Solo.”

“That’s all there is. End of story. Since nobody’s ever been caught and no traces are left, every single angle leading to the organization turns out to be a dead end. I’ve talked with the big noises in Amsterdam, Vienna, Madrid, Turin and Paris. Most of them admit the existence of the network. None of them has a single line on it. In between times, I’ve been to Warsaw, Prague and Munich—and I’ve spent a few days delving about in the underworld myself.”

“And?”

“And I have to report that they seem to be right. There’s not a whisper to be heard about this group all the way from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. Not a single cheep from a single bird.”

“Why not?” Waverly demanded. “Are they scared? Intimidation?”

“I guess not. Personally, I think it’s simply because they don’t know. It must be a very tight group—and if the regular boys don’t know a thing about it, obviously they can’t sing.”

“But how do criminals wanting an escape arranged get in touch with these people? If nobody knows who they are, I mean.”

“That’s the whole secret, I imagine,” Solo said. “They don’t, you see. Because they can’t. If they need the service— and if they’re lucky—they get contacted.” He paused and chuckled. “You know the line,” he said. “Don’t call us; we’ll call you…”

Chapter 5

Open Hostility

SOON AFTER he had finished talking to Waverly, the first attempt on Solo's life was made.

He had left his colleague's apartment in the rue Francois Premier and had just crossed the avenue Georges V when a flock of pigeons wheeling away from the plane trees abruptly changed direction and swooped toward him. Solo was thinking of something else. From the corner of his eye he sensed the approach of something shadowy as the birds momentarily veered in his direction. With some sixth sense reflex he started back a pace and half-ducked.

The instinctive movement saved his life.

Before he had time to succumb to the feeling of foolishness that always sweeps over people in such circumstances, he was hurled to one side by the passage of a small van that had cut off from the traffic roaring up the avenue and, after executing a U-turn on two wheels, had rocketed down the road between the trees and the buildings.

Solo had been just about to step into the road. The pigeons had caused him to falter and check his stride, and the vehicle that would otherwise have cut him down merely struck him a glancing blow as it sped past. Fortunately he was off-balance and thus rode with the impact up to a point.

He was spun across the sidewalk, to slam into a wooden seat and collapse giddily to the ground.

Passersby ran up as he sprawled there, panting for breath. Willing hands helped him to his feet and assisted him to the bench. A man rushed out from a wine store on the other side of the road, carrying a stiff Cognac in a glass, and an elderly lady kept telling anybody who would listen to call the police. In no time at all, quite a crowd had gathered.

"It's a scandal, the way these deliverymen drive," some one said.

“Only boys in their teens,” another voice added. “It shouldn’t be allowed!”

“Perfectly. I entirely agree,” a third chimed in.

“Did you see? He shot down here like a racing driver after making a U-turn in the avenue—a thing expressly forbidden in the Code of the Route.”

“He must have been doing sixty kilometers an hour!

“Why, only last week a friend of my uncle in Clermont Ferrand…”

“The foreigner didn’t have a chance…”

“Has anyone telephoned for an ambulance?”

“Is he hurt?”

Solo struggled to his feet, brushing aside the offers of help as politely as he could. His head was spinning. He was bruised and shaken but otherwise undamaged. “No, no,” he said. “Thank you very much, but I am quite all right… I assure you… a glancing blow only. There are no bones broken… I was very lucky, really.”

“Are you certain you wouldn’t like a doctor?” a woman inquired.

“Perfectly sure, thank you, madame.”

“Did you get the number of the assassin?”

Solo shook his head again. It would have done no good if he had. The vehicle had been one of those small gray Citroen vans with corrugated sides that can be seen by the dozen in any street in France. It had probably been stolen, and even if it hadn’t the plates would undoubtedly have been false. In any case it would turn out to be totally unidentifiable—for the man who had used the word “assassin” in the normal motorist’s hyperbole had unknowingly been speaking nothing less than the literal truth.

The driver of the van had intended to run Solo down and kill him.

Oddly enough, this fact caused Solo to smile cheerfully as he limped back to his hotel after making his escape from the well-wishers in the avenue Georges V.

For if somebody was interested enough to try to kill him, that meant that his investigations—superficial though they had been so far—were causing that person worry and annoyance. Even panic, perhaps. And this in turn confirmed Waverly’s original hunch that there was something going on worth exposing—for you didn’t try to commit murder in public unless you had something fairly important to hide.

All of which added up to the fact that Napoleon Solo was not, after all, wasting his time on a wild-goose chase. The job was going to be

worthwhile. And so Solo smiled, for above all he liked action.

At his hotel—the small, unpretentious, extremely comfortable and fairly expensive Ile de France, in a side street near the Opera—the vision at the reception desk handed him a letter that had come by special messenger.

The agent thanked her, turned aside—and then suddenly turned back again. She looked just as pretty, her hair demurely curled on her slender neck, her lips quizzically uptilted at one corner. “They work you a long day here, don’t they, honey?” he said in French. “What time do you get off this evening?”

“Officially at eight, monsieur Solo,” the girl said in English. “But I usually stay ten or twelve minutes longer. My husband works until eight too, and by the time he has got out the car and driven around here…” She flashed him a dazzling smile.

“*Touche*!” Solo murmured ruefully. He raised a hand in salute as the doors of the diminutive elevator slid shut.

In the envelope was a train ticket and a seat reservation on the evening express from Paris to The Hague. Attached to it was a slip confirming a booking for a single room with bath at the Grand Hotel Terminus. There was no letter or other form of message with these enclosures.

Solo sighed. The old man was up to his tricks again. They had agreed during their radio conversation that he should return to Holland and, without making his presence known to the police this time, try to pick up the trail of the men with whom Waverly himself had come in contact. His mission was simply—now that they knew the escape network existed—to find out how it worked and by whom it was run. Having done that, he was to try to find out if THRUSH had made any approaches to the principals or whether they were in any way concerned in the running of the scheme.

If the answer to either of those questions was in the affirmative, he was to report back to Waverly so that they could decide between them the best way of handing over their findings to the police in the country or countries involved.

If it was negative, he was to evaluate whether the escape organization was *likely* to interest THRUSH in the future and again report back for a decision on further action.

But in all these operations, it had been tacitly understood that Solo made his own way, as always, and arranged his own timetables.

The arrival of the special-delivery letter, complete with tickets and the peremptorily implicit command to use them, was a typical Waverly stroke. Presumably he had some particular reason for wanting Solo to be at that hotel tonight—maybe a contact he had instructed to meet him there. But on principle the agent asked the receptionist to look up the planes for him.

It turned out that by the time he had taken a cab out to Orly, waited for his flight, flown to Amsterdam, cleared immigration and customs, taken a cab from the airport at Schiphol into town, and traveled by train or car the 3 miles to the capital, he would get there no more quickly than he would by train!

In addition, now that he came to think of it, it was just as likely that Waverly would have arranged for a contact to meet him on the train itself.

It was also possible—Solo had to admit—that the planning boys at U.N.C.L.E. had looked up the planes themselves and had come to the same conclusion as he had regarding the time factor.

He called for his bill, checked out, and took a cab to the station.

Nobody approached him on the train, however. He ate an excellent, if rather solid, dinner. He read and he listened to endless business conversations in Dutch and German. In between times, he watched the gaunt, spare outlines of the northern landscape whirl past at 100 miles per hour in the yellow lozenges of light streaming through the windows of the coach.

The Grand Hotel Terminus was a large nineteenth-century block immediately opposite the station. Cheap souvenir shops, fried potato stalls, automat milk bars and garages surrounded the building, but inside the revolving doors all was bourgeois respectability and comfort.

The blast of overheated air that greeted him as he pushed through into the foyer was redolent of cigars, roast foods and aromatic coffee.

While he registered, he looked around him. Besides the reception desk and the porter’s lodge, the foyer housed a *bureau de change*, a newsstand, and several other large display cases rented by exclusive men’s and women’s outfitters in the town. Off to one side was a lounge full of efficient-looking men and women in armchairs. Beyond this, a paved court with a rectangular fishpond and potted shrubs showed through a line of French doors. The foyer, the shallow stairs curving around the elevator shaft, and the broad passage leading to the dining rooms and the bar were all covered in a heavy carpet patterned in blue and red.

While a boy in uniform carried up his single light-weight valise, Solo was shown his room by an elderly woman in a starched uniform and cap. Apart from the usual bedroom furniture, the vast floor space accommodated two armchairs, a settee, a desk, several low tables, and an enormous wardrobe that looked like a model of Chartres cathedral in mahogany.

Not quite knowing what to do, he sat in the lounge drinking a coffee and a brandy, read the papers, and finally climbed the stairs to his room. Nobody had made any attempt to contact him.

As he left, a busload of tourists was arriving. The foyer was full of suitcases, ranked like an army before the porter's lodge, and the revolving doors spun to disgorge more and more transatlantic visitors of both sexes, short, grim-faced and bespectacled to a tourist, in search of shelter for the night.

Solo had resigned himself to a breakfast comprising a cup of coffee and a single croissant, and so it was with some surprise that he saw the tray left on his bedside table the following morning. On it there were coffee, hot milk, orange juice, black bread, white bread, whole wheat bread, jam, marmalade, rolls, slivers of raw bacon, a shelled boiled egg naked in a glass, cold ham, and several enormous slices of Gouda and Edam cheese.

He jumped out of bed, showered, shaved, and carried the tray to the largest of the tables. Such a meal, he felt, should be attacked by a man properly seated rather than by a sybarite lounging in bed!

When he had eaten as much as he could, he drew back the curtains and walked out onto the tiny balcony projecting from the facade of the hotel four floors above the entrance.

The place was on a corner of a T-junction whose cross-piece was formed by the station concourse. Opposite it was a line of stores, arid the wide road between them forming the stem of the letter accommodated at its center the terminus of a tramway line. Queues of workers who had arrived by train were already crowding the island refuges on each side of the lines, waiting to board cars for the city center of Scheveningen. It was cold on the balcony, but the sky over head was free of clouds, and bars of pale sunshine slashed the cream stucco of the buildings across the road.

Solo drew the cord of his dressing gown tight and surveyed the scene. Two men were pushing a gigantic barrel organ into position at the edge of the sidewalk below his window. It rested on four wheels and was pulled by shafts. The body of the machine must have been twelve or fourteen feet

high, and on the brightly painted, scalloped wood of its canopy, multicolored lettering spelled out the legend DIE GROOTE HELDINGEN.

One of the men began turning a large handle projecting from the back of the organ while the other guided into a neat stack an unending succession of punched sheets, which the instrument vomited out concertina-wise as the rollicking, wheezing, jolly music cascaded into the wintry air.

Before the first tune was over, coins were showering down from the hotel windows and bouncing across from the city-bound workers by the trams. Solo ducked back into his bedroom to get a handful of small change.

His first toss was badly judged—the coin, lobbed too vigorously, landed some way from the organ and rolled into the groove of a tramline. Determined to succeed with the second, he leaned down over the balcony rail and tossed it more carefully toward the waiting musician.

As he bent forward, the rifle on the fifth floor of the building opposite cracked, and a bullet smacked into the brickwork behind his head.

Even as the agent’s mind registered the explosion, a second slug drilled the French door, sending fragments of glass tinkling to the floor. The third shot was dead accurate. It whined across the balcony a foot above the rail, exactly where Solo had been leaning an instant before.

But by this time he was flat on his face on the cement floor, worming his way backward into the room.

Chapter 6

Enter An Old Friend

BEFORE VENTURING out of his room, Solo thought it prudent to stow about his person several devices perfected by the specialists in U.N.C.L.E.‘s armory. These—which had been packed below the false bottom of his valise—included a fountain pen that fired a jet of liquid nerve gas; a cigarette lighter that ejected a sleep dart that would knock a man unconscious within a second; and a rather special pack of cigarettes. One of these was in fact a white-painted bolt of metal—and when the pack was squeezed a powerful spring projected it through the torn corner hard enough to render an adversary senseless at a range of ten feet.

There was also a tiny Berretta automatic, which the agent cached in a special holster clipped to his belt just behind his right hip. When he was dressed, it was completely hidden by his jacket.

At ten-thirty, he went warily downstairs and asked if there were any messages for him. There weren’t.

He bought papers and sat in the lounge sipping Campari and soda. Every time the elevator cage opened or the entrance doors revolved he looked up. He felt absurdly vulnerable; whoever was after him seemed unusually well informed about his movements. It was a little alarming. And just because they had failed twice, this didn’t mean they wouldn’t try a third time. And it could be third time lucky—for them!

At eleven o’clock, Solo walked along the passage toward the dining room—and suddenly realized why Waverly had sent him here.

On the left of the wide corridor was the hotel’s hairdressing salon. And from the archway leading to the reception counter and the chairs beyond, a rich and fruity voice boomed out in execrable Dutch.

Halting in his stride, the agent peered in. Surely it couldn’t be true! The last time he had heard that voice had been in Brazil… and then he hadn’t believed it!

But there was no mistake about it, the third draped figure before the minors, sitting lower than the others, turned out to be an enormous man in a wheelchair. Weighing more than 280 pounds, he sat with the great swell of his belly thrusting out the barber's sheet like a tent, the massive folds of flesh encasing his skull almost burying the unexpectedly humorous blue eyes twinkling among the fat.

It was Habib Tufik, alias Manuel O'Rourke!

Solo didn't go in right away. He waited by the entrance to the salon, watching the dexterous, almost balletic, movements of the barber as he guided a cut-throat razor unerringly among the convexities of the big man's chin.

Tufik—as he was originally named—had been born of an Irish mother and a Moroccan father. After an early encounter with gangsters that had crippled him for life, he had set up in Casablanca a specialized information service that had been without equal in the world. Police forces, embassy staff, military attaches, detectives, lawyers, newspapermen, crooks and secret agents from all over the world had come to him to buy the lowdown on anything from the private life of a foreign minister to the accommodation address used by an insignificant clerk. For Tufik sold information— just that. Any piece, or pieces, of knowledge required could be bought from him—at a price. He took no sides, and he asked no questions. The only reservation he had was that he would not sell information about one client to another.

His unrivaled sources had been built up over many years, and his encyclopedic knowledge derived in part from an exhaustive cross-referencing of gossip items culled from press outlets all over the world, in part from an adept system of bugging, and in part from plain eavesdropping and informing. It was said, though, that a fair proportion of the vast sums he received for his services was redeployed among the army of elevator operators, reporters, chambermaids, reception clerks, airline stewardesses, and cab drivers who supplied much of his raw material.

He had in fact enjoyed the reputation of being the most up-to-date gossipmonger on Earth… until Solo and his partner, Illya Kuryakin, had unwittingly involved him with THRUSH.[2] After that, he had survived a bomb attack on his headquarters and gone to South America, where—with the connivance of Waverly—he had begun to set up a similar organization.[3]

He had indeed for a short time been an ex-officio member of U.N.C.L.E.‘s overseas staff, in which capacity he had materially helped Solo and Kuryakin to foil one of THRUSH’s more dastardly attempts at nuclear trouble-making… and now here he was, of all places, in The Hague!

As the barber drew a towel down over the huge face to remove the last traces of soap, the man in the next chair rose and left. Solo slipped into the vacant seat.

“Yes, sir?” A young man with glossy black hair shook a pink sheet and held it out for the agent to insert his arms in the sleeves. The man looking after Tufik was preparing hot towels.

“Shave, please,” Solo said, glancing sideways. The fat man’s eyes, buried in the rolls of flesh like currants in pudding, were closed.

“Very good, sir… er.. are you quite…?”

The agent looked up absently. The barber had fallen back a pace and was staring at him with raised eyebrows. “What is it then?” Solo demanded.

“You did say… a shave, sir?”

“Certainly.”

“But… but… it can’t be more than an hour since your… since you had…”

Solo’s hand flew to his smooth, recently shaved chin. “Oh… Oh, yes. Yes, that’s true. Well, I guess I’d better have… you can trim my hair, eh?”

“Of course, sir. Just as you wish.” The young hairdresser looked at him oddly and fished a comb and scissors from his breast pocket. On the outside of the starched linen, the word “Colin” was worked in crimson silk.

“Pays to keep the hair well trimmed,” Solo babbled idiotically. “My favorite uncle always advised it.”

“Just so, sir.” The young man raised his eyes heavenward in silent martyrdom and began to comb and snip. There was no discernible reaction from the next chair. Tufik—a mountain of sheeted pink surmounted by a cone of white towels through which steam rose gently into the air—looked exactly like a strawberry sundae topped with whipped cream, Solo thought.

“My Uncle Waverly,” he added a little more loudly.

Among the vaporous towels a tremor manifested itself. A fold of the damp cloth subsided, and an eye was revealed. The eye opened and stared at Solo. Then it closed again.

Solo closed his own eyes and settled in his chair. “Not too much off the back, please,” he said.

A few minutes later he heard a bustle of activity to one side as the fat man was divested of his robes and towels, helped on with his jacket, and brushed down. There was a rustle and a chink of money changing hands.

“Thank you, Mynheer,” the barber’s voice said unctuously. “It is more than kind…. Thank you…. Until the day after tomorrow, then…”

And then the familiar, fruity tones: “Ah, think nothin’ of it, Anton; think nothin’ of it. When you have it, you might as well spread it about a bit, boy! For there’s none as will give you a sight nor a smell of it when you’re without it at all…. Friday it is, then. And now I’ll be on my way— there’s them as is waitin’ to see me by the canalside on Sint Pietersstraat…”

And with a squeak of rubber tires, the self-propelled wheel chair was gone.

Solo did not open his eyes. It wasn’t necessary. He knew the big man too well to need to make sure. Tufik appeared to be a loquacious, even garrulous person, a heedless and friendly man born with the gift of the gab. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He was in fact a shrewd operator who planned every move—and every single word in his conversation was there because he wanted it to be there, for a purpose. He had mentioned the name of a street in the agent’s hearing. That was good enough; it was as good as an engraved invitation to a meeting.

A few minutes later, Solo was talking to the hall porter. “Sint Pietersstraat?” the man repeated, scratching one side of his moustache. “Yes, I think so, sir. It should be… let’s just have a look at the street plan of the city…. Yes! Square G6 on the grid… Here we are, see? A small street running by this canal. You’ll find it off the Duikersteeg… second or third turn after the lights.”

It was, in fact, Solo found, only four blocks from the hotel. The canal was narrow, its surface completely covered with leaves. There appeared to be no current and no traffic. On the far side, the high walls of warehouses and industrial buildings cut off the view. The street itself was bordered by small houses in rather poor repair—much shabbier and less imposing than the tall edifices in Amsterdam—and there was a towpath a few feet below it, to which, every hundred yards or so, a cobbled ramp led down.

Solo noted with some amusement that to reach the Duikersteeg he had to pass along Onkelweg—Uncle’s Way.

Once in the Sint Pietersstraat, he hurried along the granite setts looking for some sign of Tufik. The wintry sunshine was still quite bright, but there was a keen wind blowing and the shadowed side of the road was cold. Some of the two story houses had stable-type half doors at the entrance, and over several of these, the top half being open, slatternly women leaned. One flabby creature, wearing what looked like the top portion of a swimsuit, called out something to him in a dialect too broad for him to understand, and a burst of laughter echoed down the street.

It was singularly like Tufik to live in or near a quarter fitted with half doors like an Irish village, Solo thought to himself. But where was the Irish-Moroccan?

And then suddenly he saw him. The wheelchair was below him and to one side, parked on the towpath by the extreme water's edge. The fat man, bulging massively over its frail structure, appeared to be gazing along the line of stunted trees whose fallen leaves had choked the surface of the canal. Solo quickened his pace and went down the nearest ramp.

Although he had his back to the agent, Tufik somehow sensed his approach. Before he reached the foot of the ramp, Solo saw the wheelchair turn through ninety degrees, so that it was facing away from the canal, and begin to move toward the wall separating the towpath and the roadway. Then, to his astonishment, Tufik was apparently swallowed up by the brick facade. As smoothly as a rehearsed stage exit, the sequence of events unfolded—Solo's approach, the fat man's realization of it, the spin of the chair, the unhurried progress to the wall… and the final disappearance of chair and occupant!

Slowing his walk to a casual saunter, Solo reached the bank, glanced across the water and then—as a tourist might regard and reject—swung back toward the street. And at once he saw how Tufik had vanished.

Recessed deeply in the brickwork, a series of low arches ran along below the surface of the road. Behind them, he guessed, were shallow cellars. Most of the arches were boarded up or bricked in. But in one of them a rough wooden door gaped open. The wheelchair must have gone through this.

Solo patrolled a few more yards of canal bank, turned, and began to stroll back in the direction of the ramp. After a little, he veered toward the wall.

Near it, he saw the brickwork cut off the view of the houses on the far side of the road and that he would be invisible from the upper stories. He hurried up to the arch with the open door. Inside, beneath the dark vaulted ceiling, there seemed to be only a kind of storeroom with rolls of wire netting, an iron barrow, a pile of planks and several oil drums stacked in a corner. He walked a couple of paces into the gloom.

At once the door slammed shut, blanking out the light completely. But before he had time to be surprised, electric lights blazed on and he found himself facing a girl. “Mr. Napoleon Solo, I believe?” she said politely.

She was flaxen-haired, with a pink face and a tip-tilted nose. She wore an ice-blue sweater, that matched her eyes and tall brown boots with a very short skirt. Her hips were slender and there was a provocative twist to her mouth. Her age, Solo judged, was about twenty-two.

“Hi there!” he said. “What a pleasant surprise! I believe Mr. O’Rourke is expecting me.”

“Mr. O’Rourke?” the girl said. Her voice was slightly husky.

“Habib Tufik, then, if he likes that better.”

“He doesn’t like you to use either of those names,” the girl said severely. “Please remember to use his correct name when you see him.”

‘And that is?” Solo was amused.

“Mynheer Hendrik van der Lee.”

The agent grinned. “Good old Hendrik,” he said softly. “I’ll try hard not to forget… and talking about unforgettable names, what’s yours?”

“You may call me Annike,” the girl said. “If you would please follow me…”

She insinuated herself between a stack of planks and the wall, reaching out with one arm. Evidently there was a hidden switch there, for a moment later there was a quiet whine of hydraulics, and a section of wall behind the oil drums rumbled aside. Beyond the opening, a vaulted passageway led back beneath the road.

Annike went through and waited for Solo to follow. Two yards down the passage, they broke a magic-eye beam trained from one wall to the other, and the secret door swung shut behind them.

The corridor was brightly lit, brick built, and floored with rubber composition tiles. Their footsteps hardly made a sound—and the wheelchair, Solo reflected, would have been virtually noiseless. When they had gone a distance that he estimated would have taken them under the road

and beyond the row of houses bordering it, the corridor turned sharply right and stopped by a blank wall. The final section of tiling on the floor was outlined by a narrow crevice as though it were a trapdoor. The girl stepped on this square and motioned Solo to follow her once more.

As soon as he was standing beside her, she reached out and pressed the end of one of the bricks set in the wall. Again there was the whine of machinery, and the section of floor, complete with the ceiling above it, rose slowly on a hydraulic ram.

The platform lifted them a distance of about fourteen feet and stopped. On three sides they were enclosed by brick work. In the fourth wall was what looked like an ordinary door. The girl opened it and they walked out into a luxuriously furnished bedroom.

They must be on the ground floor of a house in the row behind those with the half doors, Solo thought, a house whose official entrance was no doubt on another street altogether. From the room, the elevator now looked just like a rather large built-in cupboard that happened to be empty. Nothing would show either, he was certain, when it was at the lower position: what was now the ceiling of the cupboard would become the floor, and another ceiling would have lowered it self to replace the first one.

Closing the door, Annike led him through a screen of heavy velvet drapes masking an archway. In the huge room beyond, Solo at once felt at home.

Gray steel filing cabinets were ranged around three of the walls, and on a bench projecting from the fourth the chassis of radio transmitters and receivers crowded up against the amplifiers and speakers and matched spools of a sophisticated tape deck ensemble. In the center of the room was a board room table big enough to seat twenty people, its polished top almost submerged in a tide of newspapers, magazines, handouts and information sheets stacked in piles twelve to fifteen inches high. And there were great heaps of journals, too, mixed up with floods of newspaper cuttings and dozens of sheets of paper covered with scribbled notes, on the chairs, over the coffee tables, and on every available inch of horizontal space in the room. In one corner was a closed-circuit television screen.

The place looked, in short, exactly like Tufik’s head quarters in Casablanca and Rio de Janeiro, both of which Solo had known. Even the complicated console controlling the tape equipment, with its switches and dials and rheostats and its twelve-channel mixer, was the same.

Like a pale spider in one corner of its web, the fat man himself was waiting for them on the far side of the room.

“Mr. Solo! Mr. Solo!” he cried delightedly as they pushed through the curtain. ” ‘Tis a pleasant surprise indeed to be seeing you! Come on in and sit you down at once, while I see about fixing you some liquid refreshment!”

With all his old expertise, Tufik whisked the chair in between tables, chairs and stacks of books, to roll up to the agent with outstretched hand.

“Well, you old rascal,” Solo said affectionately, grasping the fat but surprisingly sinewy fingers, “and what have you been up to? What are you doing in Holland, for heaven’s sake? I thought you’d settled for good in South America!”

“For good?” the Moroccan-Irishman echoed. ” ‘Twas an uneasy marriage at all… and that bein’ so, I looked at the for-good-or-for-ill part of the contract and decided there was too much ill and not enough good. So a divorce, you might say, was arranged and I came here. No but seriously, look, there was too many revolutions and coups d’etat and I don’t know what-all else over there. A man couldn’t keep track of who was who!”

He broke off and looked at the girl. “Perhaps you’d be kind enough, my dear, to bring Mr. Solo and myself a small jar of the creature,” he said.

She nodded and disappeared through a doorway at one side of the radio transmitter. The only other door to the room was at the far end of the same wall, by the tape decks. There was one window opposite the curtained archway through which Solo had entered. It was masked by a venetian blind through whose slats the roofs of parked cars in a wide residential street shone in the sun.

The agent was looking for a place to sit. Every available space seemed to be covered with newspapers and clippings, but eventually he removed a copy of *Le Monde*, a front page torn from *Corriere della Sera*, and a month’s issues of *Krokodil* from a stool and lowered himself in their place. His host, he was amused to see, still used his own personal system of polychromatic underlining, ringing and marginal annotating on the raw materials of his trade.

“What made you decide on The Hague, though?” Solo asked conversationally. “It seems somehow so… well, so *unlikely*!”

“Don’t you believe it, me boy! If you want to keep a finger on the pulse, there’s hardly a better place in Europe. It’s between Amsterdam and

Rotterdam, and it's not too far from Antwerp—there's three of the biggest ports on the Continent for a start. And in my experience, if you want to know what goes on, like the nice girls, you ask a sailor! The boyos that work the airlines are good for a lot of stuff too, mind. But sure, they're the same anyway, anywhere you go. And we have Schiphol near enough, with connections to France and Germany and all the Scandinavians. But there's never a corner like this, that gets as much shipping, that's also near an international airfield… except perhaps Marseille. And that's a little too near home, if you take my meaning!"

"Okay, okay," Solo laughed, holding up a hand to stem the flow. "You convinced me… Hendrik!"

"Ah, now," the fat man said chidingly. "Listen you! There's no call to make a mockery just because a fellow takes the precaution to adopt, as you might say, a spot of protective colorin', now is there?"

"I guess not. Tell me about the setup here, anyway. You seem to have it all arranged very nicely."

"It's not bad, at that. From the street you see through that blind, this place is a kind of cheap hotel. We have a bar there, and although 'tis not a port itself, the town sees plenty of boyos from Amsterdam and Rotterdam. And from the canal, too, for that matter. So the bar is crowded…"

"And bugged at every table, no doubt?"

"… and bugged at every table," the fat man agreed equably, with a sidelong glance at the multichannel tape recorder inputs. "We obtain a great deal of useful information from those tapes… when they've been sorted, that is. Which is why bar prices are cheap and why we take care to keep it filled."

"And the hotel?"

"Curiously enough," Hendrik van der Lee said dryly, "the hotel seems to be booked solid all the time. There's never a room to spare when a body tries to book!"

"You yourself never appear on the hotel premises at all, I suppose?"

"Never. I always come along the canal bank on the Sint Pietersstraat. It's easier for the chair that way, for there are steps in the front here, you see. Also it means I'm never connected with the place at all. And there's a third advantage we have here, Mr. Solo."

"You restrict yourself to three?"

Van der Lee chuckled throatily. “Apart from the sailors and other boyos who give me information—er—involuntarily, through the hidden mikes,” be said, “there’s plenty more who come here to deliver the goods they’re paid for.”

“I can guess. Hotel porters and taxi men and—”

“Quite, quite. We don’t have to be too precise, do we? Well, these ladies and gentlemen have to get in to see me. And whereas a crowd like I have might soon draw attention in another neighborhood, it works very well here. There’s always a few sailors droppin’ by to see the ould girls on Sint Pietersstraat—I have another entry through one of the houses there—and there’s always a multitude comin’ to the bar of the hotel. So between them, who’s goin’ to notice a few extra here and there?”

Annike came back into the room carrying a tray. Pushing aside a heap of manuscripts on the big table, she set out glasses, coffee cups, saucers, a long-handed, conical copper pan full of thick, sweet Turkish coffee, and a bottle of Izarra—the fiery yellow Basque liqueur that was the only spirit the Moroccan-Irishman had ever been known to drink.

“You still have a sweet tooth, I see!” Solo said as the girl handed him a cup of steaming coffee and a glass of the *digestif*.

“Ah, yes. It’s a thing you never lose, Mr. Solo. Your continued good health, sir. And now—what can I do for you this time?”

“I thought you might know,” Solo said. He had imagined that since Waverly had arranged the meeting, he might have briefed Van der Lee. But the big man merely shook his head slowly.

“Oh, well in that case I’ll tell you,” the agent continued. “It’s just a piece of information I want… but you’ll not find it in your filing system or your newspaper stories this time. You might get a lead from your secret microphones, though—if you have enough members of the bent fraternity in your bar. But I have to warn you there’s not a police department in Europe that knows the answer to my question.”

“Yes, Mr. Solo?”

“Quite simply, it is this: there exists a highly organized escape network in Europe. For a price, it takes people across frontiers, out of reach of the law. All the police forces know it exists; not one knows a thing about it. What I want to know is, one, who runs this organization; two, how it works; and three, how one gets in touch with it if necessary.”

Solo sat back on his stool, drained his cup, and set it down carefully on its saucer.

Tufik, or Van der Lee, had not moved. He sat bulkily in his chair, staring straight ahead and humming a tuneless little air through his teeth. The girl, who had been curled up on the floor at his paralyzed feet, rose and refilled the cups and glasses.

Eventually the fat man moved. He spun his chair around and wheeled swiftly to the other end of the table, where he began ferreting about beneath an untidy pile of gossip columns torn roughly from the previous week's Sunday news papers. "There's a telephone in here somewhere," he muttered. "I know there's an instrument on this very table… Ah!" He gave a cry of triumph and flourished an ivory-colored receiver in one hand. His other hand delved back into the pile, and there followed the sound of a dial being spun.

After a moment he began speaking. There was a conversation in rapid Dutch, which Solo was unable to follow, and then he said in English,"… Oh, and by the way—here's a tip you can pass on to the advocate! Tell him, from me, that the articles he wants can be obtained in Brussels… Yes, quite cheaply. In boxes of ten… But tell him they're much stronger than the English ones: I think there's a whole cc. in each." He chuckled and then added, "And tell him the information won't cost him a penny. It's on the house."

He turned the chair back to face Solo. "It's not an easy thing you're askin'," he said slowly. "But if you care to come back around midnight, I think I might have somethin' for you. In the meantime…"

"I know. The little question of emolument? I suppose it's too much to hope that you're still working for Waverly?"

"Indeed it is, Mr. Solo. Indeed it is. Pleasant though that little arrangement was, it was purely temporary, you understand. I wished to take my revenge upon a certain organization, and helping you seemed the best way to do it. But it couldn't last long, mark you: it got in the way of my usual business."

"I can imagine," Solo said. "How much?"

"Well now… seein' you don't take the subscription service—you'd be well advised to consider it, an organization like yours, you know. You should tell Waverly—but seein' you do not, then it's the regular straight fee for a single piece of information."

“Which is?”

“In Dutch currency, two thousand five hundred guilders. And since you are an old friend, we’ll consider the three separate pieces of information you want simply as if they were one… “

“Well, thank you!”

“… and add only the customary fifty percent surcharge that we impose in cases where the information sought is especially difficult to obtain.”

“Be my guest!” Solo said caustically, holding out his wallet. He paused with his fingers on the thick wad of notes it contained. “Plus, I have no doubt, a healthy percentage for ‘service’?”

“Twenty,” Van der Leo said calmly. “The staff have to be looked after, as you know, in this kind of business.”

“And, if I remember, still more for state tax or something…”

“Mr. Solo!” the fat man interrupted. “You forget what a neat and tidy country it is here. In Holland all prices are net!”

“So thank goodness for small mercies! How much?”

“Wait’ll we see now… two five and fifty percent is twelve-fifty makes seven-fifty plus two plus one equals three seven-fifty… plus twenty percent of that equals seven-fifty again… making four five. A straight four thousand five hundred floris, thank you, Mr. Solo.”

“About thirteen hundred dollars,” Solo said as he counted notes into the fat palm. “It’d better be good!”

“Always trust an old friend,” Van der Lee said piously, stuffing the money into his hip pocket. “If you’d like to leave via the hotel, it would probably attract less attention in the long run. Annike will show you the way; she’s going out anyway.”

“Okay then,” the agent said. “See you midnight. What way do I come in?”

“The way you came today. There’ll likely be plenty of boyos about on Sint Pietersstraat, and you’ll be able to get down to the towpath all right. Just make sure nobody actually sees you go in the archway, that’s all.”

“Okay,” Solo said again. “See you.”

He followed the girl into a short passageway and then through two steel doors. In the space between the doors, a tall man with long sideburns and a dark moustache sat at a table cleaning a Walther PPK with a brown butt. Solo recognized the bodyguard Manuel O’Rourke (as he was then) had had in Rio. “Hello, Raoul,” he said as he passed. “Nice to see you again.”

The tall man looked up and bowed gravely from the waist. He said nothing.

Beyond the second steel door was a tiny office. And outside the office was the foyer of a typical commercial hotel—full of brown paint, out of date brochures and posters, dispirited artificial flowers and faded notices covered in food stains. Through a door at one side they could hear the brawling hubbub of a crowded bar.

Once they were in the street, the girl took Solo's arm. "I like dark men for a change," she said. "It's not many people he sees personally, you know. What do you do, Mr. Solo?"

The agent grinned. "Let's say," he mused, "that if Mynheer van der Lee sells information, then I acquire the same commodity—preferably without paying for it!"

"You are a detective?"

"No—just an information gatherer. There's one item you could supply, Annike."

"Certainly," the girl said, pressing the taut curves of her young body against him as they walked. "If I can. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what time you have to be back."

"Back with Hendrik? Why, not until midnight. I'm off-duly now."

Solo looked down into her flushed face. There was a mischievous twinkle in the blue eyes, a mocking tilt to her mouth. "That's far too much of a coincidence to be passed up," he said. "Are clients permitted to date the staff?"

"I see no objection if the staff is not on duty," Annike said demurely.

"Fine! Will you come with me then? We'll paint the town red until midnight—when, like all princesses, you'll have to leave the ball. But until then, we'll have a ball! What do you say?"

"I should like that very much," the girl said.

"Swell. Where shall we go then? And I warn you, I may make a pass!"

"I seldom wear glasses," Annike laughed. "Would you like to go to Scheveningen? It's only two miles. We can walk by the sea—and I'd like to try the food at the Bali. I'm crazy about Indonesian food. We could have an early dinner and go to one of the shows, yes?"

"That would be fine. Let's grab a cab right away."

"My car is here," the girl said, stopping beside a Fiat 850 coupe in an unusual shade of mustard yellow, which was parked by the sidewalk. "But

where are you staying? Do you have a topcoat? There will be a wind—and it gets cold after dark, you know.”

“You’re so right!” Solo said. “My hotel is only a couple of blocks away. If you don’t mind making a detour, I’ll run upstairs and get one while you wait.”

He left the girl, looking remarkably voluptuous despite her slender build, in the chic little fastback while he took the elevator to his room.

He washed his hands and face, splashed Lanvin’s Monsieur Figaro on his forehead and his wrists, combed his hair, dabbed himself dry with a towel and, after a final look in the glass, went into the bedroom to fetch his coat from the closet.

At first he thought it was gone. Then he realized it had slipped off the hanger and was lying in a crumpled heap on top of his shoes on the floor. With an exclamation of annoyance, he leaned in to pick it up.

The nylon stocking filled with wet sand made no noise as it swung down to meet the nape of his neck.

The floor cracked open into an abyss of darkness, and Solo fell through and went on down.

Chapter 7

Visitors From The East

THE SMALL MAN with the gray crewcut paid off his cab in front of a row of seedy brownstones a block from the East River. He looked sharply once in each direction and crossed the sidewalk to a tailor's shop in the middle of the row. An erect man with a firm, springy step, he walked in his belted gabardine raincoat and his pepper-and-salt suit as though he would be more at home in a uniform. He opened the door of the shop and went in.

Behind the crumbling neighborhood facade, the steel and glass and concrete fortress of U.N.C.L.E.'s headquarters lay hidden—buttressed additionally, like a row of volumes between bookends, by a public garage at one extremity of the block and a restaurant and key club at the other. There were four entrances to the place (and rumor postulated a fifth, known only to Alexander Waverly, though nobody had ever heard him refer to it). The one used the most was for the Command's clerical and technical staff. It was gained through the washrooms of the garage. The entrance used by official visitors was at the far end of the block, through a suite of offices above the key club. There was a water gate—a subterranean channel cut through to the basement level from the East River. And the last entrance was that reserved for U.N.C.L.E.'s Enforcement Officers, the cream of the Command's operatives. It was through the tailor shop of Del Florio in the middle of the block.

The man with the gray crewcut was not, however, an Enforcement Officer. He had in fact never been on the street before. Or in New York. Or, for that matter, in the United States of America. He was just very well briefed.

He strode to the back of the shop, nodded genially to Del Florio, who was occupied with his pants pressing machine, and went into a fitting cubicle. The old man was in his shirtsleeves, tape around his neck. Mechanically, he returned the greeting and pressed the hidden lever at the

side of the presser that released the controls operating the secret door inside the cubicle. And then, phoenixlike, he straightened up among the clouds of steam, his brow wrinkled in puzzlement. The gray man had carried such conviction in his manner that Del Florio had assumed he was a new enforcement Officer, one he had not seen before. They came in all the time.

But there was an established routine for new operatives the first time they used the entrance. And the gray man had not followed it. Del Florio pressed another button, which had been installed for just this purpose. If it had been labeled, the label would have read PRVISIONAL ALERT.

Inside the cubicle, the small man hauled down on a certain coat hook projecting from the back wall, waited for the concealed door to swing aside, and walked through into the passage leading to the Command's reception foyer.

The Nigerian girl seated at Reception had already seen him coming on the closed-circuit TV screens suspended above her desk that monitored all entrances. Even without the winking orange indicator that Del Florio had put into action, the defenses of the place would have been ready to meet the intruder. Passages leading to the three other entrances had been automatically blocked off by steel bulk heads. The corridor to the secretariat and the stairs leading to the other floors would have been similarly cut. The power supply to the elevators would have been cut, and there would be an orange light winking on every desk in the building while the provisional alert lasted.

Little of this showed, however. The man with the gray crewcut saw, as he walked up to the desk, only the dark figure of the girl and a pair of uniformed guards with machine pistols standing one on each side. It might have been—in fact, it was—what any normal visitor would see when he approached Reception. And if the splendid figure of the Nigerian girl was a little more tense than usual, it didn't show from the far side of the desk.

But the intruder was not bent on mischief. He walked quietly across, clicked his heels, and said in clipped, formal English: "Good day. I should like to speak with Alexander Waverly, if you please."

The girl was trained to deal with unexpected situations, but this one threw her a little. People did not customarily walk calmly in through the Command's most secret entrance and expect to see the boss! "I… er… I'm afraid it's not… well, it's usual to make an appointment," she stammered finally.

“I have not the time to waste on formalities, protocol, what you call the pink tapes.”

“Red tape, sir. Yes… But I’m afraid… Can I have your name, please?” the girl said hurriedly, clutching at a straw of routine.

“I am Colonel Ladislav Hradec, of a branch of the Czechoslovak military intelligence with which you would not, I imagine, be familiar.”

Back on home ground, the girl became crisp and efficient again. “Just a moment, Colonel,” she said. “If you would kindly take a seat, I’ll call somebody who can deal with your case.”

“I am not a case. I wish to see Waverly.”

“Yes, Colonel. If you would just take a seat, sir…”

A minute later Jim McGrath, the forty-year-old ex-FBI man responsible for the internal security of the building, was standing beside the visitor. He explained in some detail why it was impossible for casual passersby—however eminent—to see Waverly, especially if they had illegally entered by a secret route. The Nigerian girl watched them—McGrath with his toothbrush moustache bristling, his eyes wary behind the rimless glasses; the Czech standing stiff and correct, talking with the minimum of gesture, his attitude inflexible. She’d put her money on the foreigner, she thought privately; there was a certain assurance about him that simply would not admit the possibility of defeat.

And it said much for the colonel’s air of authority that she proved to be right. Within ten minutes McGrath, all smiles, was personally conducting him to Waverly’s office.

“But of course, Colonel Hradec,” Waverly said, glancing at the small visiting card in his hand. “You are well known to me by reputation. But why did you not telephone to make an appointment? We would have sent a car for you and you would have been properly received. I must apologize for the embarrassment to which you have been put. But you must appreciate that we have to take certain precautions.”

“Understood. I did not telephone because you might have been officially ‘out’ and I have little time to spare. Western officials are not always too keen to meet people from what they call the Eastern bloc.”

Waverly had been filling an ancient briar from a pouch he had fished from one of the baggy pockets of his jacket. Now he laid these down and held up an admonitory finger. “Really, Colonel,” he said, reprovingly, “I’m afraid I simply must take you up on that remark. The Command is in no

way affiliated with the Western powers. As I am sure you must know very well, we are a strictly supranational organization. We go wherever we are needed, when we are called. We have on numerous occasions answered calls in the Soviet Union, in Poland, in Yugoslavia, in Eastern Germany. It is not our fault if those countries call us in less frequently than the others. We are always ready to come."

"Perhaps it is that the societies of those countries are ordered in such a way that there is less need for you there…"

Waverly inclined his head in polite acceptance.

"But you have to admit that U.N.C.L.E. *appears* to be, shall we say, an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, at least superficially," Hradec continued. "Its headquarters are near the United Nations"—he gestured toward the room's one window, in which the U.N. building was precisely framed— "many of its staff are American, and much of its operational potential is American-financed."

"We can hardly be blamed," Waverly commented, "if certain states have not fulfilled their obligations with regard to the appropriation that was voted to us."

"Agreed," the colonel said. "But whatever the cause, the effects are unfortunate. Nevertheless, I was interested today to make my way into your —er—fortress by unorthodox means, because it was an instructive exercise and it afforded me the opportunity to test the efficacy of our own intelligence services, who had supplied the necessary information."

"One trusts that you found the experience… rewarding," Waverly said dryly.

"Most, I thank you. A few of the interior details were missing—I did not know about the steel doors, for instance. But the briefing on the approach and entrance itself was admirable. I found my way to the correct shop, and through into the Reception area, with no difficulty at all."

"Splendid! I imagine, however, that this was not your sole reason for visiting New York?"

"By no means." Colonel Hradec cleared his throat. For the first time he appeared almost at a loss. "What I have to say may appear odd to you," he ventured at last. "You will agree that, in whatever equivocations we choose to clothe it, there is a difference—between East and West, I mean!"

Waverly nodded. "Of course. Difficult to define, but it's there."

“Exactly. And because of it, we are committed, those of us in my trade, to an endless chess game, an elaborate ritual of denial and counter denial, of claim and rejection, which makes nonsense of truth and actuality as we know it to be. It is a convention, absurd perhaps to an extreme, but one that is imposed upon us by our masters and one we must follow.”

Waverly nodded again.

“If an espionage agent defects from country A to country B—probably because he has a girl there or because the money is better—country A will deny that he has defected, they will deny that he was a spy, and they will deny that, if he was a spy, they knew anything about him. Country B, on the other hand, will in turn deny that it offered the man money and try to make out that he came because he had become convinced of the rightness of that country’s way of life over the other’s.”

For the third time, Waverly’s gray head bobbed up and down. He stuck the pipe between his teeth and reached for the pouch again.

“Within the framework of these non-real conventions,” Hradec continued, “any attempt at genuine cooperation is impossible. But when we come to the question of malefactors, of lawbreakers, of wrongdoers, and crooks, as you call them—as distinct from ideological agents, that is—then quite another set of conditions obtains, does it not?”

The colonel walked to the window and stared out at the storm clouds massing over the tangled roofs of Queens. “In the case of vulgar felons,” he said bitterly, “since they cannot in any way advance the cause of our respective dialectics, then we can afford to cooperate. Is not that so?”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” Waverly said quietly.

“Very well. I am here, then, to offer cooperation—or, rather, to make a suggestion which you are of course free to accept or reject as you wish.”

Waverly looked at the trim little man expectantly, his hand arrested in the act of reaching for a box of matches.

“We are as anxious as you are to inhibit the activities of the conspiracy calling itself THRUSH, for example. And that anxiety extends to any other organization which might be a potential help to THRUSH,” Hradec said, adding astonishingly, “there exists an escape organization in Europe which comes under that heading and which it would be to everybody’s advantage to destroy. I assume you have heard of it?”

Waverly was caught with his mouth open, a lighted match halfway to the pipe he held in his other hand. Yet again he nodded.

“Right. Well, we believe we have the means of getting in touch with this network, of putting a man, a particular man, in contact with them—a task which has so far baffled every police chief in Europe, as you no doubt know.”

“I’m listening,” Waverly said.

“Let me give you three facts. One, there is in my country a convicted bank robber and murderer who has just escaped from a prison near Praha. He made for the capital, where he will be waiting with a large sum of ready money, wondering what to do—a natural client, don’t you think, for our network?”

He paused for a moment. Waverly had uttered a sharp oath, dropping the match, which had singed his fingers, into an ashtray.

“Two,” Hradec resumed, “this man is known to have gone to ground in the old city and to have laid his hands on the money he had cached away. He is also known to be seeking a way out of the country, for obvious reasons. And the third point is that he is dead…”

He paused for effect. Waverly was staring uncomprehendingly at him.

“We had in fact discovered his hideout,” Hradec explained.

“As we moved in to flush him out, he broke cover and fled… and he was knocked down and killed instantly as he ran across a road in the early morning. The important thing about this is that nobody outside the secret police, not a soul, knows that he is dead. There were no witnesses to the accident, and as far as the underworld is concerned, he is still lying low in his hideaway.”

“I’m afraid I cannot quite see—”

“There is one further fact you should know,” the colonel went on, brushing aside Waverly’s interruption. “It is a visual one, so I shall content myself with showing to you a photograph.”

He took a pigskin wallet from his breast pocket, opened it, separated an envelope from a neat bundle of passport, papers and airline tickets, and took out a postcard-size portrait, which he handed to Waverly.

“That is Kurim Cernic—the murderer who is no longer amongst us,” he said.

Waverly looked at the photograph and gasped.

For the features staring out at him from the glossy print could have been those of Illya Kuryakin!

Chapter 8

Illya Sweats It Out!

"YES, IT REALLY is quite remarkable!" Colonel Hradec said a few minutes later, looking from the photograph in his hands to the live face of Illya Kuryakin. "The features are the same and that is a help—but what is even more astonishing is that the hair grows the same way, and the height and build are identical. That is almost as important!"

Kuryakin himself, Russian-born, American naturalized, and as respected east of the Oder as he was west of it, had been hastily summoned to Waverly's office. Next to Solo, he was Section One's most trusted operative.

"I won't waste words, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly had said after he had introduced the two men. "You probably know something of the case Mr. Solo is working on. In any case you can take away the file when we have finished speaking. For the moment I just want you to concentrate on this picture and on what Colonel Hradec tells you."

"This man was a robber and a murderer," the Czech said. "He had escaped from prison and was in hiding in the old part of Praha when he was killed. Nobody knows he was killed except the SNB—the state security police—and my own department. We also know the place he was using as a hide out, the places he got his food—everything. We even know where he keeps the proceeds of his robberies hidden, for we had been watching him for some time."

"And you want me to take his place?" Kuryakin said.

"Exactly. We could introduce you into the quarter secretly, at night; you could go up to the attic in which he was staying—and nobody would know he had ever been away from it. All you would have to do is darken your hair slightly and remember to limp on the left foot a little. That way even his closest colleagues would never know the difference."

“The suggestion is,” Waverly put in, “that if you hide out where this character was and let it be known quietly that you want an—er—assisted passage out of town and that you have the loot to pay for it, then this escape gang is bound to contact you.”

“After which?”

“After which you agree to pay them whatever they ask, let them take you along the route—and keep in touch with Mr. Solo on your transceiver, so that the two of you together can wind the whole thing up.”

Beneath the tow-colored hair and the bulging brow, Kuryakin’s pale eyes were amused. “And we also keep in touch with the SNB and the military intelligence gentlemen?” he asked. “Or do we deal it off the sleeve?”

“*Play* it off the *cuff*,” Waverly corrected automatically. “If it’s a question of dealing, it would be *from* the sleeve. But in any case that’s what you do; Colonel Hradec feels that there would be too much risk attached to any system of liaison with him.”

“Definitely,” the colonel affirmed. “You’re on your own as soon as we have given you Cernic’s clothes. Just find out who works the system and how and then report back, eh?”

And so, a few hours later, his hair darkened with a chestnut rinse, his left shoe fitted with a protuberance inside that made it impossible not to limp, the Russian sat next to Hradec in an Illyushin jetliner, fastening his belt as they circled to land at a military airfield near the Czech capital. They were met far out on the perimeter track by an ancient Tatra staff car, which drove them recklessly through the rain to a command-post caravan parked in woods between the airfield and the city. Here Kuryakin was given local shoes, socks, and underwear, with a gray turtle-neck sweater and exceedingly wide flannel trousers with deep cuffs. Then they set off for Prague.

They crossed the Vltava by the Smetanov bridge, dodged a late tram at the Prikopy junction, and swung into the Vaclavske Namesti. The street glittered with light from the junction to the statue of Wenceslas on his iron horse, but there were very few people about. Soon the car turned and threaded its way back toward the river among the narrow, cobbled streets of the old town.

They stopped halfway down a twisting thoroughfare leading into a small square. Around them, the tall, narrow houses were shuttered and

silent, but light from a single street lamp splashed lozenges of silver onto the ancient stones through the branches of a linden tree in the center of the square. There was more light streaming onto the cobbles from the open door of a *kavarna* on the far side of the open space. Over a chatter of voices, the sound of an accordion brayed softly.

Colonel Hradec leaned forward and opened the door of the Tatra. “Very well, my friend,” he said quietly, “now it is up to you. You know where to go; you know what to do. Just remember that our murderer is known since he came to this quarter simply as ‘Milo’—and that the real Cernic was very roughly spoken, bad-tempered, a surly fellow!… Good luck now!…”

As Kuryakin melted into the shadows, the door clicked shut, the staff car turned and whined away down an even narrower street, and the Russian was alone with his new identity.

Much of the flight from New York had been spent, with Hradec’s help, in memorizing a detailed street map of the area and learning the position of the few stores Cernic patronized and the kind of things he bought there. There was therefore no difficulty in finding the right route, and Kuryakin—having waited a few minutes to let the car get away—emerged from the darkness and slouched down toward the square.

Managing the limp was no trouble—the lump inserted in his shoe by the experts of U.N.C.L.E.‘s Wardrobe Department made every step excruciating. What concerned him more than his actual appearance was his voice. He had no means of knowing how the late Kurim Cernic had articulated—Hradec had merely said his voice had been a little deeper than Illya’s. Fortunately, the escaped convict had come from the region of Kosice, in eastern Slovakia, which meant that any trace of Russian accent in the agent’s speech could easily be accounted for, this being the part of the country nearest to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, he looked forward with some misgivings to his first attempt at passing himself off as the man whose clothes he now wore. And the test was to come sooner than he had expected.

The route to the attic in which Cernic had been living led past the *kavarna* on the far side of the square—a bar in which the convict had passed an hour or two at the beginning of every evening. As Kuryakin limped past, two men reeled out of the open door and hailed him.

“Hey, Milo!” one called. “Where the devil have you been? Haven’t seen you around for days. How have you been, eh?”

“Yes, how are you, you old soak?” the other shouted with a drunken guffaw.

Kuryakin scowled. “None the better for your asking!” he snarled—and, spitting scornfully on the cobbles, he stumped on toward the alleyway leading to his attic.

There was a burst of laughter behind him. “Who was that?” a girl’s voice asked.

The Russian glanced over his shoulder. She was standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the smoke-filled interior of the tavern, a slender young woman with smooth blonde hair to her shoulders, wearing an unbuttoned trenchcoat.

“That?” one of the drunks repeated. “That’s only old Milo! What a character! He must be the most bad-tempered man in town! Never been known to smile!”

“I don’t see that that’s anything to boast about,” the girl objected. “Who is he, anyway?”

“Oh, some hick from the east,” the first man said, tiring of the subject. “He comes from the Carpathians or some where. Come on—let’s have another drink!”

“He doesn’t look like a countryman.”

“Well, he probably worked in the bauxite mines. Do come on.”

“If you ask me, he looks more like a crook! He probably came here to escape the police—”

“Then he’s safe in this neighborhood, isn’t he?” the second man interrupted. “For you don’t catch them down here often; they prefer to wait until we go up to the bright lights and trap us there!”

“Look, you two! For God’s sake!” his companion growled. “Do forget old sourpuss for the minute. Let’s get going, eh? We should have been at Imre’s twenty minutes ago.”

“Well, if you ask me…” the girl began again—but the rest of the sentence was lost in a fresh burst of laughter, mixed with singing, as more people spilled out into the square. Somewhere beyond the linden tree, a window frame squeaked open and a voice called angrily for quiet.

Kuryakin limped on. Beyond the oasis of gaiety in the square, all was deserted again. Down the alley, turn right across the courtyard and go through the arch, walk up the stone steps and take the second cul-de-sac on the left.

There it all was, exactly as the colonel had described it.

The old buildings leaned together across the passageway so that from the leaded windows of one projecting top story to the peeling shutters of the one opposite, the gap was small enough for a man to jump. Ancient, bowed beams cradled tile and brick and crumbling plaster. At the corner, a turret with a conical slate roof was etched against the night by the reflection of a lamp beyond the archway. And ahead, zigzagging up the wall blanking off the end of the alley, a rickety wooden staircase led to a door beneath a sagging dormer. Beyond it was the hideout of Kurim Cernic.

Kuryakin climbed the stairs and thrust the iron key he had been given into the lock. It turned silently, and the door swung open.

Inside there was a light switch with a cracked porcelain cover. In the feeble illumination of a single unshaded forty-watt bulb, he saw a large room with a varnished pine floor, a bed, a table, and two wicker-seated chairs, one each side of a dark mahogany cupboard. Cans, packages of dried food, and a bottle of milk that had soured jostled for position on the top of a cheap wooden chest of drawers.

The Russian crossed over to a tiny window beneath the sloping roof. He opened the shutters and leaned out into the dark. Beyond a black jumble of roofs, a curve of lights along the embankment marked the course of the river. The air was fresh, cold and tingling. In a few minutes the musty, stale atmosphere in the room had cleared. He drew back his head and prepared for the night.

In his role as the escaped murderer, he had no papers, no weapons, and no clothes but those he was wearing. There was a small baton transceiver in the breast pocket of his shirt. Behind the dirty curtain hiding the primitive washing and sanitary arrangements there was a skylight. And through the grimed glass of this could be reached the massive, curved tiles below which were hidden banknotes to the value of some $450,000.

With these two rather differing assets to his credit, he installed himself in his hideout and settled down to wait…

Chapter 9

A Surprise In Store!

THERE WAS a roaring in Napoleon Solo's ears. The world heaved before his anguished eyes in waves of blackness. Somewhere far down in his skull, a team of men with pneumatic drills were trying to blast their way out.

He raised his hands to his throbbing forehead and touched nothing. *Oh no*! he panicked. *It's gone! My head's off—and there's nothing in its place*! And then, gradually, as he regained consciousness, the head floated back into position, and he realized that he hadn't touched it at all. He couldn't have, because his hands were tightly bound behind him.

Bound? Yes, and so were his feet. Something hard and yet resilient, unpleasantly dry to the taste was jammed in his mouth and secured there with a strip of cloth. His jaws, wedged apart by the gag, were as painful as his head.

After a while his memory returned fully, though the blackness and the roaring remained.

It took him some time to work out that he was shut up in the back of a truck—an ancient one, to judge by the extreme hardness of the ride and the racket made by the motor, the exhaust, and the booming of the metal side panels.

He strained his eyes in the darkness. There was not the vestige of a light anywhere—no cracks between doors suddenly illuminated by the headlamps of a passing car, no errant reflections from street lamp or lighted window. It must, he thought, be very late at night. And if the abominable surface was anything to go by, they were on a very minor road.

He tested his bonds. His wrists were tied tightly together, not crossed but face to face. His ankles were bound and so were his knees. But for they had left his elbows alone. If they had been lashed together, he could have done nothing; but as it was, given the opportunity for a bit of contortionism,

he could probably contrive to bring his hands around in front of him. And then they would see, for—fortunately again—the bonds were neither wire nor electric cord, but simple rope. Before he could try anything, though, he would have to wait until the vehicle stopped. He was being thrown about far too much to attempt it now.

For what seemed like many hours, they lurched and banged along the bumpy road. And then at last the truck turned sharply, hurling him across the metal floor like a sack of coal, and they were on a smooth surface.

He heard the sucking whine of heavy-duty tires, the regular concussions of air as they thudded past cars and trucks, going in the opposite direction. From time to time, as some late traveler came up behind them and awaited his opportunity to pass, the cracks outlining the rear doors were limned in bright light. And then the noise of the tires altered to an oily hiss, and he heard the drumming of rain on the roof.

Shortly afterward the truck bumped off the road and groaned to a halt.

The rumble of the motor died away. The pattering of the rain appeared to increase in volume. A door slammed, and there were sounds of footsteps squelching on wet ground. Solo feigned unconsciousness, his breath snoring slightly through the gag, his eyes turned up.

There was a sudden rush of damp, cold air as the doors at the back were jerked open. Somebody stared inside, flashed a light, grunted, and slammed the doors shut again.

Through slitted eyes, the agent had a momentary impression of a small, nut-faced man in blue overalls, a man with a heavy, pugnacious chin, silhouetted against a glare of light in which rain sloped down in silver lances. And then the iron bar had been dropped across the doors and the footsteps were receding.

He waited for a moment to make sure nobody else was coming. And then he forced his cramped body into action. Rolling over on his back, he gathered his strength and launched himself upward, so that his pinioned feet were pointing at the roof and he appeared to be almost standing on his head —his whole inverted body balanced on his elbows, neck and shoulders. Then, opening his arms as wide as he could, he rolled himself downward again, drawing his knees tightly into his chin and keeping his heels against his haunches. At the same time he passed the hoop of his arms over his hips and tried to bring his bound hands over his feet.

He had almost succeeded, when the heels of his shoes fouled on his wrists—and no matter how hard he tried to bring his knees up further, the feet just wouldn't go through!

Panting and cursing under his breath, he struggled for some minutes before he hit on the obvious solution.

And then, grasping the heels of the shoes firmly in both hands, he jerked them off his feet and tipped them both to the floor. The stockinged feet slid smoothly through the loop of his hands and arms… and at last his wrists were in front of him.

The first thing he did was to reach up and tear off the strip of cloth retaining the gag—and then, painfully, he ejected the gag itself. It was, he discovered, an ordinary tennis ball.

With his bound hands, he explored his pockets as far as he could. The Berretta, of course, was gone. So was the cigarette pack. But the pen appeared to be in place, and the lighter was still in the breast pocket of his jacket. How ironic, Solo thought, that after all the trouble the Armory guys had been to, incorporating a weapon into the thing, it was in fact simply as a lighter that he was going to use it!

Fortunately, it was not one of the self-extinguishing type. Once the wheel had been flicked, the flame continued to bum until the hinged top was lowered over it. He flicked the milled wheel and set the lighter with its small flame on the truck floor.

In the flickering light he saw that apart from a pile of old sacks, the back of the truck seemed to be empty. Gritting his teeth, he lowered his wrists toward the flame.

Two and a quarter excruciating minutes later, the last charred strand of rope parted and he was able to snatch his wrists to his mouth and suck the seared and tender flesh. Quickly, he picked the knots at his knee and ankle and untied his legs. And then, massaging himself to restore his circulation, he took the lighter and began prowling around the truck to see if he could find anything that might help him to get out of it.

It was not very big—larger than a half-ton panel truck but not by any means a *poids lourd*—probably a two or three tonner, Solo thought. The back was, as he had supposed, empty apart from the sacks. But the boxlike storage space continued forward over the roof of the driver's cab.

And here, lying in a corner with a coil of wire, three plugs bound in insulating tape and a twist of oily rags, he found a rusty hacksaw blade.

This was a prize! Scrambling down to the floor again, he tiptoed to the back doors and flicked the lighter on. Although the paneling was rusty, it was a close fit, and the blade would not go through the gap between doors. Panting with the effort, he managed to lean against the outer door with one elbow at the same time as he hooked his fingernails around the edge of the other and painfully drew it toward him. Imperceptibly, the crack widened until he was able to slip the old blade through.

From there it was relatively easy to work it upward until it lodged against the bottom of the fiat iron bar retaining the doors. Sweat beaded Solo's brow as he wrestled the slender steel finger upward against the weight of the bar—but at last the bar was clear of its socket, and he tilted the blade away from him so that the bar slid off and clanked down, leaving him free to push open the doors.

The rusted paneling swung outward. Immediately behind the truck stood the short man the agent had seen before, his hair plastered to his skull by the rain, his jaw jutting more ferociously than ever.

Solo had no means of knowing how many others there might be. His only hope was to act fast and run. It was no time for detailed investigation of who they were or why they had kidnapped him. The thing to do was to get away!

He poised on the tailboard of the truck, waiting to leap. Watching him with glittering eyes, the little man hefted a big spanner wrench from hand to hand. Behind him the shrouded shapes of trucks and trailers in a parking lot blanked off the neon lights of an all-night cafe.

And then, as the man with the chin moved forward, the agent acted. But instead of jumping, he pulled the pen from his breast pocket, sank to his heels on the tailboard, and aimed the pen at his adversary's face.

Before the man could lift the spanner, Solo had operated the lever, and the jet of nerve gas screamed full at his adversary's nose and mouth.

Above the huge jaw, the man's eyes widened in surprise. His mouth opened—but before he could utter a sound, he had twisted around and slumped to the wet ground as dramatically as a puppet whose strings have been cut.

With a single bound, Solo cleared his recumbent figure and sped off into the rain and the night.

A moment later, he was back. He had forgotten, until his stockinged feet squelched into the wet ground, that he had not put his shoes back on.

Cursing, he dragged them over his drenched and muddy socks and set off once more.

When he was a hundred yards away down the road, he stopped and looked back. There seemed to be nobody else around the truck and there had so far been no hue and cry. The blare of a jukebox seesawed from behind the steamed up windows of the cafe. Cars and trucks hurtling past in each direction sent long fingers of light probing the dark along the wet road. But otherwise there was no sign of life.

Astonishingly, though, he knew where he was! By a chance in a thousand, he recognized the stretch of road. It was a phenomenon he had remarked before—how suddenly, without any tangible clue, the mind would "read" into a certain confluence of landscape features here, an arrangement of wall and tower and roof there, the certain knowledge of place. So that rounding a bend, one would know positively that at any moment such and such a sight was going to appear. So that on an apparently unknown stretch of road, one would become irrationally possessed of the certitude that this village or that bridge was just ahead.

So that on a night like tonight, Napoleon Solo would know beyond all argument that he was—out of all the roads in Europe—on a section between Hasselt and Maastricht in southeastern Belgium and that a mile down the road, there would be a rather high-class roadhouse in whose vast parking area he would almost certainly be able to steal a car.

Buttoning up his collar against the rain, he hurried on.

Mercifully, his papers had not been removed from his breast pocket, so there would be no trouble crossing the frontier on his way back to Holland. But it was unlikely that any car he could knock off would have its own documents and insurance certificates neatly stowed in the glove compartment! Regrettably, things just didn't happen that way….

He would have to junk the stolen vehicle at Lommel, on the border, cross the frontier on foot, and pick up another at Bergeijksche Barriere, on the far side. Allowing for these delays, the 13-odd miles to The Hague should take him in the neighborhood of three to three and a quarter hours, he figured.

Actually, it took less—mainly because the first car he acquired was a 300SE Mercedes, and the second was a Volvo, but partly because it was a miserable night and the men at the frontier posts were tired.

The Sint Pietersstraat was shuttered and silent when he coasted the Volvo to a halt a little after four o'clock. Nobody saw him flit down to the towpath and melt into the shadows of the archways. Nobody heard the faint creak as the wooden door opened. Finding the secret switch behind the planks was a chore because the fluid in his lighter was almost gone. But at last he was standing on the elevator being carried up to the wardrobe in Tufik's bedroom.

He turned the handle and strode in. The room was empty, but there was a gleam of light from behind the curtains. The fat man was busy marking up some papers, crouched down in his wheelchair in the light from a single green-shaded lamp pulled low down over a table.

"Good evening," Solo said evenly. "I'm sorry I'm late."

Van der Lee looked at his wristwatch. "A bit," he said. "But sure, pay it no mind, for I never sleep until six."

"Have you seen Annike?"

"Certainly. She was in just before midnight. She said you'd stood her up, too—took her back to your hotel and walked out on her, she said."

"That *may* be true," Solo said enigmatically. "I was sapped and then taken for a ride. Whether or not it was because that young lady suggested I should go and fetch something from my room, I don't know. In the meantime, since the people responsible are almost bound to be the same ones I'm asking you to find out about, I'm more than eager to hear what you've discovered. Give!"

"Ah, sure, you're not in a hurry at all. Sit you down and let's have a spot of the creature."

"I'm in a hurry to hear your news. What have you found out?"

The fat man toyed with a fat sealed envelope he had picked up from the table top. "Now who wants to be hasty!" he said evasively. "Relax, you. And wait'll I tell you some thing."

"Well?"

Van der Lee sighed. He seemed ill at ease. Spinning the chair away from the light, he picked up the envelope suddenly and held it out to Solo. The agent took it and slit open the flap with his thumb. It was filled with banknotes.

"Four thousand five hundred guilders," Van der Lee's voice said from behind. "You'd better count it to make sure it's correct."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

The fat man was wheeling about all over the room, straightening a pile of papers on this table, making unnecessary adjustments to the clippings on that. “Sure, it’s simple enough,” he said gruffly without looking at Solo. “I can’t help you, I’m afraid. I cannot take the job.”

“But… but why on earth not, man?”

“I’m very sorry,” Van der Lee said awkwardly. “But it turns out, now I’ve had a chance to look into it, that the people who run this escape network, the fellows you asked me to find out about, are in fact already clients of mine. So I can’t tell you anything about them—it would be against all me own rules.”

“You couldn’t… break the rules just this once? For old times’ sake?”

“You know better than that, Mr. Solo. Sure, me cardinal principle is that there’s only one kind of information I don’t sell—information about another client. You wouldn’t want me to break that!”

“I guess not…but…”

“There *is* one thing I can tell you before you take your money and go, however—if it’s of any use to you…”

“I’d welcome any information, of course.”

“Well then, I’ll tell you—since the client protection business can work in two ways!… The boyo you’re askin’ ‘about, he asked me a question I was not able to answer too!”

The fat man paused, looked straight at Solo, and said, “*He* wanted me to find out everything I could about *you*.”

Chapter 10

The Contact Is Made.

FOR TWO DAYS, it rained incessantly in Prague. It was raining all over Europe, but the downpour was heavier, more relentless, and seemed somehow wetter, in the Czech capital.

Illya Kuryakin sat and shivered in Cernic's attic room, listening to the ceaseless drumming on the roof and wondering if the damp was getting in under the tiles and destroying the hoard of banknotes hidden there. There was nothing else to do—the bank robber, whatever else he may have been, had certainly not been a reading man, for there was not a single book or paper in the place!

Each morning, Illya took a raincoat from a hook behind the door and battled his way through the downpour to a general store on a corner in the lane below. Here he bought milk, pilsner beer, black bread, a few vegetables and a kilo of *parkys*—the succulent Czech sausages, which he cooked on the battered hotplate, his sole means of heat. In the evening, he went to the *kavarna* on the square and drank steadily for an hour or an hour and a half, speaking to nobody in particular and keeping his general remarks pessimistic in tone and surly in utterance.

Once he had got used to the steady pelting of the rain on the roof, he found the attic uncannily quiet. The lower floors in the old building were entered from a different street altogether, and the two stories immediately below him were used as a stationery store anyway. The place was too hemmed in for any traffic noises to penetrate. And even the birds appeared to prefer the caves of the higher buildings surrounding them.

There was apparently no landlord or landlady. So far as the police had been able to find out, the place belonged to Cernic himself. Perhaps he had acquired it years ago and kept it against just such an eventuality as this.

To amuse himself, Kuryakin improvised a set of chessmen from the screw tops of toothpaste tubes, shaving cream, ointment and tomato puree,

using as pawns a collection of studs of the kind that launderers put in shirts. He carved squares from the top of the chest of drawers with a kitchen knife and played conscientiously against himself as the long hours dragged past.

The first time he had been to the shop, the storekeeper—a red-faced man in round spectacles—had called out, “Ha! So you’re back again! What happened to you yesterday and the day before? We thought you’d got lost or run over or something.”

Presenting a tough, villainous and boorish facade was the most difficult part of the assignment for Illya—normally the mildest-mannered and most equable of men. But he had to do the best he could.

“What the devil has it to do with you where I was?” he snarled, thrusting out his jaw as far as he could. “You should learn to mind your own business, my friend—and your business is selling people what they want with no questions asked. *My* business is… well, that’s my business!”

“All right, all right,” the shopkeeper said hastily. “No need to bite a man’s head off, is there? I was just passing the time of day.”

“Well, don’t pass it prying into other folk’s affairs,” Kuryakin growled —and then, since it would probably be a good idea to put about some story accounting for the absence of Kurim Cernic, he added in less hectoring tones, “I was laid up with a dose of flu, if you must know. This damned climate gets me down; I wish the devil I could get away. Your beastly, dirty city air plays hell with the lungs of a man who’s used to the fresh air of the country. Now, back in Slovakia, where I come from…”

He gave the same story to the proprietor of the *kavarna*. It was as well to answer questions before they were asked— and that remark of the shopkeeper’s about being run over had come uncomfortably close to the truth! “Flu, was it?” the innkeeper said. “Takes it out of you, don’t it? You look a bit peaky, I must say—you don’t look yourself at all.” And he scrutinized Illya’s face with an intensity that made the agent quite uncomfortable.

Kuryakin had been told that Kurim Cernic had always used a particular corner of the *kavarna*, and he conscientiously carried his drinks over to this seat every evening. But however gruff and unapproachable he was, there was always one thing he could not guard against—the arrival of an intimate friend whom he might not know he should recognize; someone, perhaps, he might even be expected to hail! This was a hazard, however, that he would

have to deal with when it arose. His first test in fact derived from a foe rather than a friend.

It was his second evening in the inn. He had stamped across to the bar to fetch his third Baracz. When he turned around with the shallow glass of apricot-colored liquor and started back to his seat, he saw that it had been taken in his absence.

A large mustached man with hands like hams was sitting nursing a pot of beer with a metal lid.

Judging from his baggy trousers and the peaked cap on his head, the fellow was some kind of workman. Illya had little doubt that he had taken the seat quite innocently and had no idea it had been occupied. But he realized from the giggles and covert winks being exchanged by the other customers that Cernic was expected to make something out of it.

A sudden silence fell in the bar as he walked heavily across to the corner, set his glass down on the scrubbed top of the table, and stood with his fists on his hips.

The man with the beer looked up and raised inquiring eyebrows.

“I think you’re mistaken, friend,” Illya said in an unfriendly voice. “That’s my seat you’re in.”

“Your seat?” the big fellow said. “You bought the place maybe?”

“I was sitting there,” Kuryakin growled. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Out.”

“Well, I’m sitting there now,” the man said shortly. He tugged a creased newspaper from his pocket, unfolded it, and began to read ostentatiously.

Scowling as ferociously as he could, Illya snatched the paper away and hurled it to the floor. “I said that’s my seat. Get out of it!”

The big man half-rose threateningly. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he cried angrily. “I’ve a good mind to—”

He broke off as Kuryakin swept his tankard off the table with a crash. He drew a deep breath… and suddenly erupted into action in an attempt to throw the table over toward the Russian.

Kuryakin leaped in tigerishly and slammed it down on its legs again, pinning his adversary in the corner behind it. He was in some difficulty. The man was half a head taller than he was and strong besides. Cernic’s reputation as a tough was almost certainly based on straight rough-housing and fist fighting. Yet Illya was not in fact particularly strong physically—and he could hardly risk making a show of the judo and karate of which he

was master. In the split second that the big man was frozen against the wall by the table, he decided to try to cripple him with a single karate blow and then put in some fisticuffs afterward for the benefit of the gallery—and of his impersonation.

Seizing the man by the collar, he jerked him viciously face downward across the table top. Then, before his opponent could recover, he linked his hands and brought them hurtling down on the unprotected neck. The fight was in effect over then—the man's reflexes were paralyzed. But the window dressing had to be put in for the customers.

Kuryakin growled with simulated rage, cast aside the table, and thrust the fellow back up against the wall. Steadying him there with one hand, he drove three pile-driving blows to the pit of his stomach, allowed him to slide toward the floor, and finally helped him on his way with a couple of contemptuous rabbit punches. The man was out before he hit the ground.

Abruptly the place was loud with chatter again. The proprietor stood the table upright, dusted it down and replaced Illya's drink. A couple of the bar's patrons dragged away the unconscious man, and Kuryakin sat down, staring morosely into his glass.

The clientele were a rough bunch. Among them were the two drunks who had accosted him the night he arrived. And several times he saw the blonde girl who had been with them regarding him furtively. But the majority of them seemed to be the Czech equivalent of gangsters. There was not the opportunity for an organized underworld here that there would be in a Western city, but such crooks and black marketeers as there were, he would wager, hung around this quarter and this particular bar.

On the morning of the third day, Illya awoke and realized that he could no longer hear the rain on the roof. He threw the shutters wide and looked out on a different city.

The downpour had not long been over, but the sky was now an impeccable blue and the pale winter sunshine gleamed and sparkled from a million droplets of moisture dewing the chaos of slates and dormers and tiles and cornices and gutters outside the window. A crescent of the river glittered between the high blank wall of a warehouse and a forest of chimneys to his right, and above it the turrets of the fairytale palace on the high ground above the town shone in the bright light.

In the narrow, twisting streets of the quarter, shopkeepers and their customers had an air almost of gaiety about them, and several food stores

displayed crates and baskets of fruit and vegetables on the sidewalk.

Kuryakin felt justified in taking Cernic to the *kavarna* at lunchtime and passed off the ribald references to this break with tradition with a snarl a little less surly than usual. The blonde wearing the open raincoat—her name, he had discovered, was Marinka—even gave him a half smile when he came in, and the proprietor was quite cordial.

"That's a bit better, isn't it?" he said cheerfully as he took Illya's order. "Makes the world a more cheerful place, I always say, when there's a bit of sun around, eh?"

"For those that have time to notice, I suppose," the Russian said grumpily. "As for me, I still wish I was a thousand miles away from it."

"Why, comrade? It's not such a bad city. At least there's life here!"

"Life? I'd give a great deal to get out of it. Right out, I mean—and I'm not kidding. Rain or shine, it makes no difference to me. All I want—"

"If you hate it so much, why don't you get out, then?" the proprietor interrupted reasonably. "There doesn't seem to be anything to keep you here; you don't seem to have a job or anything."

"You mind your own damned business!" Kuryakin shouted, thumping the table. "It's none of your business why I stay here. What I do is my own affair and I don't want any interfering snoopers meddling."

He drained his glass and stalked out, leaving the inn keeper staring in amazement. Anyone at that bar who didn't suspect by now that "Milo" was a crook on the run, the agent thought to himself with a grim smile, must be pretty dumb!

That evening he returned to the *kavarna* and took his usual table. But he affected to be still angry and kept huffily to himself, returning none of the "Hey, there, Milo!" and "Looking for another victim?" pleasantries of the drinkers.

Several hours after he had returned to the attic, the soft knock on the door penetrated his consciousness. He got out of bed, drew on a pair of trousers, and opened it a crack. It was still fine outside, and in the light from a half moon he saw a girl standing at the top of the stairs.

She wore an open trenchcoat with the belt hanging, and the moonlight glinted on her hair.

It was Marinka, the blonde from the *kavarna*.

"What do *you* want? What the devil d'you mean by waking me up at this time of night?" Illya snapped ungraciously.

“Let me in,” the girl whispered. “I have something to say to you. It’s important. Come on! The longer I stand here, the more likely it is that someone will notice.”

Grumbling and growling, the Russian opened the door wide and stood aside with bad grace to let her through. Once she was in, he closed it and turned the key before switching on the light. The girl was pushing thirty, thin faced, with large gray eyes.

“You’re Kurim Cernic, aren’t you?” she asked softly.

“Kurim who? Never heard of him!” Illya said promptly. He did not ask the girl to sit down.

“Look—do not bother to deny it. I *know* you are Cernic.”

“I tell you I never heard—”

“Oh, never mind then! You’re not Cernic! But you keep on saying how much you want to get away from here, don’t you? Obviously you are on the run, or you would just go.”

“Supposing I was, then?” Kuryakin said craftily.

“If you wanted to get out of the city unseen, without the risk of being asked for papers; if you wanted to get out of the country, even… “

“Well…?”

“Well, I think—if you have money—I think I know some one who can arrange it for you,” the girl said.

Chapter 11

Getting Underway

AT TEN-THIRTY the following evening, Illya Kuryakin stood on a corner of Wenceslas Square and watched the crowds thronging the wide pavements beneath the trees on the Vaclavske Namesti. Glittering with lights, bordered by push carts, and stalls selling hot *parkys*, the street pulsed with the gleam of fast-moving traffic. In a few minutes Kuryakin would have to act; but for the moment he was content to stare and to think.

He had argued and protested the previous night for what he considered a sufficiently credible amount of time before he permitted himself to be persuaded to talk seriously. He had guarded his suspicion and his hostility until the last possible moment. But finally he had given in and allowed the girl to make her proposition.

After bargaining and blustering for hours, he had eventually agreed to pay what he had considered privately to be an incredible sum for the privilege of being secretly transported to Zurich, Switzerland.

The girl had refused to divulge any details of how this was to be accomplished; she had merely said that the organization was well enough known to need no references. And she had made a rendezvous for the following night and told him to bring the sum with him in cash. He had filled in the intervening time by going to the roof and removing the correct amount of banknotes from the hoard under the tiles. He had also pretended to remove the balance and mail it to himself *poste restante* in Zurich. But the bulky envelope had in fact been stuffed with blank paper; by arrangement with Hradec, the loot was to stay in its hiding place for collection by the police.

He had no doubt, standing among the crowds clutching a cheap briefcase to his chest, that the police were keeping him personally under surveillance too. But they could hardly have acted against the girl and her accomplices, since it was not illegal to transport a citizen of the United

States from Prague to Zurich, whatever method was used! And in any case it had been agreed that, having delivered Illya into the correct area, they would withdraw and leave the chase to U.N.C.L.E.

But they would be there, just the same, he was sure.

For the moment, though, the hour of truth was at hand. He glanced at his watch—it was ten-thirty-six—shifted the briefcase to his left hand, and walked a little way up the hill. Where the tramlines forked into double tracks, there was a safety zone in the middle of the street. He crossed over and stood there as if waiting for a tram.

At ten-thirty-seven precisely, a car—a Skoda Octavia in anonymous beige—stopped briefly by the safety zone. A door opened. Kuryakin got in.

The girl Marinka was driving, her slender wrists and feet expert about the controls as she whirled the car in and out of the traffic clotting the great square beneath the domes.

“Where are we going?” Kuryakin asked suspiciously. “Surely we can’t simply drive out of the city openly like this. There are too many police about, we could be stopped and asked for our papers at any time… and anyway, my face is known.”

“Do not worry,” the girl said. “All is taken care of but it is best to begin with a short auto ride, lest there is anyone following. We have a rendezvous not far from where you were staying.”

“Then why meet in the Wenceslas Square and drive there when we could have…”

The girl sighed. “We can leave the car and walk, if you wish. But it is better like this.” She turned down toward the Carlos Bridge and then right along the embankment. Soon she turned again, up into the old town, and stopped by the long, blank wall of a warehouse. The building had perhaps once been some official place, for there were turrets at each end and the high wooden gates were enclosed in an ornamental arch. “See,” the girl said. “We are by the repository you see from your window. There is the entrance to the other floors of your building, around that corner.”

She pointed to the archway at the end of the wall. “And there is where you have to go now. Inside the gate is a small pass door. Soon, the watchman leaves to fetch his beer for the night. After he has gone, go through the door. It has been… arranged… that it will be open.”

“And then?” Kuryakin demanded suspiciously.

“Inside is much furniture, stored on all the floors. But there is also a loading dock with a van and a trailer. They are already packed full. Get into the van—not the trailer— and squeeze as far forward as you can. You will find right at the front a wardrobe, facing away from the doors at the rear of the van. You get into this—it will be quite comfortable with blankets and pillows—and you wait.”

“How long for? I don’t like vague arrangements like this.”

“I also. But here we have no choice. There are many police and you are much wanted. Besides, the people arranging this make good business for themselves, but also they must take risks. So they must state the terms. You understand me?”

“Very well, very well,” Illya growled. “But I still don’t like it.”

“Now,” the girl said briskly. “We must act. See, the watchman leaves to visit the *kavarna*.” She waited until an elderly man in overalls had walked from the gates to the corner, and then vanished around it, before she continued, “You have the money with you?… So. Good. No, no—keep it. They will ask for it when it is time. Now, is there anything else before you go?”

“Yes. How long shall I be cooped up in there? When does the van leave? I hate being shut in, not knowing when to expect action… and I’ve not eaten since this afternoon, either.”

“You would like to eat some food before? That also I can arrange.”

“Forget it. Just tell me how long,” the Russian said ungraciously.

“I cannot say. It is not for me to decide—it depends on too many things. Tonight sometime…” the girl said.

“Can’t be too soon for me,” Illya grumbled. “Well, is that all then? Because if it is, I’ll be off. Get the thing over with.”

“Yes, you may go now. And hurry while the man is away.” Her long face creased into a smile, and for a moment, in the lamplight, she looked quite beautiful. “Perhaps I will say one thing more,” she added, “I wish you the good luck…”

She leaned across and opened the passenger door.

The agent muttered something under his breath, got out of the car, and limped off down the pavement with his briefcase clutched to his chest, without so much as a backward glance. Before he got to the gates, he heard the Skoda’s engine start and then the whine of gears as the girl turned in the narrow street and drove back the way they had come.

It went very much against the grain for him, but he figured that in one thing, at least, he had played his role true to the real Cernic—the girl and the clientele of the *kavarna* in the square must certainly be confirmed in their belief that he was the rudest, the most boorish, the most bad-tempered man they had ever met! He smiled grimly to himself as he approached the pass door let into the big gate; there were more serious ways in which he would have to test the authenticity of his impersonation soon. .

The door, as the girl had promised, was unlocked. He turned the handle, opened it, and stepped through.

There was a light burning inside a glassed-in hutch where the watchman obviously sat between his rounds. Through the glass, Illya saw sausage, black bread and pickles laid out on a newspaper awaiting the arrival of the beer. And there was a low-powered bulb hanging above the platform at the rear of the loading dock behind the gates. But otherwise the place was in darkness.

The van and its trailer looked enormous—two leviathans of the road silhouetted against the dim shapes of sheeted furniture bulked in the dark.

He let the door snick shut on its return spring and listened. Very distantly, he could hear the sounds of the city— a roar of far-off traffic, shouts and a snatch of music from another street, a siren on the river, bells (could it really be only eleven o'clock?). But nearer at hand there was nothing—no footsteps, no demanding voice; just a scuffle and a squeak as a rat scurried away somewhere down the aisles of furniture, the thin, high, singing of silence in a large place.

Satisfied, he walked openly to the space between the van and its trailer. The double doors at the back of the van were ajar. Pulling one open, he climbed up into the interior and edged his way between stacks of chairs and tables and crates exuding straw, toward the front of the vehicle.

The wardrobe was roomy. And there were blankets and pillows stuffed into it as the girl had promised. Making himself a kind of nest in the dark, Illya settled down and prepared to wait.

Soon after he had arrived, he heard faint sounds suggesting that the night watchman had returned. Not too long afterward—the luminous dial of his watch showed five minutes short of midnight—voices echoed under the high root of the loading dock. The doors at the back of the van were opened and then slammed shut. Retaining bars dropped into place. There was a clatter of mechanical activity as the great motor whined and then coughed

to life… and the body of the truck began to vibrate as the diesel settled down to its normal idling speed.

A few minutes later, they jerked into motion and rolled out of the warehouse into the night.

It was easy enough for Illya to distinguish between cobbles and setts and asphalt; between town roads with tramlines and country roads with potholes; between the surfaces of suburb and highway. But he soon lost all sense of direction and stopped trying to work out which way they were going. By and by, in the darkness, the monotonous rhythms of the vehicle and its trailer put him to sleep.

He was awakened by a bright light shining in his eyes. He struggled awake and sat up in his nest of bedclothes. “Ah—so it’s you all right, then,” a gravelly voice pronounced. “You’d better hop out of there. You change here, and we have a bit of business to transact anyway.”

Kuryakin knuckled the sleep from his eyes and followed the man with the flashlight past the furniture and out into the dark. The van and its trailer were drawn up under a canopy of trees beside the road. But as soon as they were standing on solid ground, his guide rapped twice on the paneled side. The starter whirred, the motor caught, the headlights were switched on, and the double juggernaut lumbered back onto the road and disappeared down the tunnel of light it was carving from the dark.

The Russian looked about him. The sky was clear, and in the moonlight he ould see hills on every side, most of them heavily wooded. The road showed as a faint ribbon twisting down into a valley, at the bottom of which water gleamed palely by a bridge.

Beside him, the man with the flashlight presented a stocky, powerful figure. He was wearing overalls and a peaked cap, and his face, in the reflected light, was seamed and wrinkled above a jutting jaw.

“What’s the idea?” Kuryakin asked suspiciously. “Where are we?”

“Not far from Krumlov,” the hoarse voice said. “That’s southwest of Budejovice. We bypassed the town. That’s the Vitava you can see in the valley down there.”

“How far have we got to go to the border?” Illya asked, looking at his watch. He had slept nearly three hours.

“Less than thirty kilometers. Then it’s only about the same distance again to Linz.”

Kuryakin thought he had better put in a bit of character again. “That’s all very well, my friend,” he grated. “But how the devil are we supposed to get there, now that you have sent the transportation away? What are you playing at?” He hugged his briefcase to his chest and glared at the little man.

The latter laughed. “Keep your shirt on, comrade!” he said. “I only paid Jan to let me bring the van out of the city, just to get you clear. He has work to do that’s a genuine load that has to be delivered. He has to get back to Kralovice, beyond Pizen, by daybreak.”

“That’s not my worry. Let him look after himself, whoever he is.”

“He’s been looking after you well enough, friend. Do you think we could have got you past the three roadblocks between here and Praha without that genuine load, complete with its bills of lading and other papers, and the authentic van?

“I tell you that’s not my affair. What I’m paying you for—”

“Ah, yes!” the man with the jaw interrupted. “Paying… Talking of which—let’s have it!” He held out a hand for the briefcase.

Illya hesitated and then passed it over.

The little man counted the money carefully in the light of the lamp. Then, dividing it roughly in two, he stuffed one half in his pocket and put the other back into the case, which he handed to Illya. The Russian stared at him.

“Matter of faith,” the little man said. “We’ve always had a good reputation. Based on mutual trust. You don’t seem too happy. So to show you we are on the level, I’m giving you half back. You can hand it over when we’ve got you safely to Zurich. Okay?”

Kuryakin nodded, reflecting with a wry smile that if by chance the man *was* treacherous and intended to kill the client and keep the cash, it would hardy matter in whose hands the notes were at the time of his death!

“We’ll get on now,” his guide was saying. “We cross the border at a very small custom post on a back road. There’s only two night men on duty, and they’ll be half-dead from sleep now. I’d like to get there before they start freshening up to meet the six o’clock relief.”

“Yes,” Kuryakin snarled, “but how the devil—?”

Placing a finger on his lips, the other walked a few paces to one side and parted a screen of bushes. Hidden by the leaves, a half-ton delivery van

stood facing the road. On its sides, Illya could just make out lettering announcing the name of a firm of electrical suppliers in Linz.

“They’re used to seeing this crate go through,” the little man said. “At this time of night, it should be a piece of cake! They’ll hardly look in the back… but we’ve taken precautions, just the same. Look at this…”

He opened the rear doors. In the small delivery space were two half-dismantled television sets, a few old-fashioned radios, a brand-new electric cooker, and a huge refrigerator.

“The refrigerator is empty,” he continued. “All the shelves and so on have been taken out. When we get near the border, you can get in there, just in case. But until then, you’ll be okay here in the back. I’ll tip you off just before we get there.” He handed the Russian into the van and then, with a curt nod, slammed the doors, ran around to the cab, and started the engine.

A moment later, they in their turn bumped out onto the road and sped on their way.

In the black interior, Illya made himself as comfortable c he could among the rattling, banging, bouncing items of electrical ware. The longer he could stay out of that refrigerator the better!…

But after that things started to happen rather quickly. As a prologue, Kuryakin took the baton transceiver from his breast pocket and pulled out the telescopic antenna. Thumbing the send switch, he bent his lips close to the tiny microphone aperture and spoke over the clattering of the little van.

“Hello?” he said. “Hello… Kuryakin to Solo. Channel open. Kuryakin to Solo. Channel open. Kuryakin to Solo—come in, please…”

Chapter 12

The Advance Of Napoleon

“THANK GOD you’ve come in,” Solo said. “I was beginning to get worried!” He rolled over in bed, holding the transceiver above the sheets, and switched on the lamp standing on the bedside table. The hands of the travel clock beside it pointed to three-twenty-two.

“Listen, Napoleon,” Kuryakin’s voice came faintly from the miniature speaker. “I may have to cut out at any moment. Do you read me?”

“I read you,” Solo said. He turned off the light and snuggled down into the bed again, taking the transceiver below the covers. “You are aware that it’s between three and four A.M., I suppose?”

“I haven’t time to joke, Napoleon.”

“Then why call me at this hour, for heaven’s sake? Not that it isn’t good to hear your Slavic voice.”

A chuckle floated from the baton. “I’m sorry about that. This is the first chance I have had. Listen—I’ve made contact. They’ve taken me on.”

“What! But that’s great, Illya—that’s fine!” Solo was siting up again, reaching for a pencil and a notepad, feeling for the light.

“I’m being taken to Zurich. At the moment I’m in a small truck somewhere near the Austro-Czech border. We’re heading for Linz.”

“Have you come all the way in the truck?”

“No. I started out from Prague in a furniture van. With furniture.”

“Okay. Seen much of the organization?”

“A girl in Prague. The driver of this truck. That’s all.”

“Never mind. It’s a start. I’ll contact Waverly and tell him. In the meantime, I’ll try to join up with you, okay?”

“Yes, I think that would be best, Napoleon. If we could work it so that I was on the inside, as it were, and you were nearby, on the outside…

“We’d stand some chance of getting the complete low down on the setup? I agree. Look—when will you arrive in Zurich? Tomorrow

afternoon?”

“I should think so. We have three frontiers to cross—the Austro-Czech, the Austro-German and the German-Swiss. And don’t forget that I am supposed to be an escaped murderer; so in my adopted role all three should prove equally difficult. The people taking me, that is to say, do not only have to be careful getting me through the so called Iron Curtain.”

“I see what you mean,” Solo said. “Tell you what, Illya— I’ll grab a rented car at dawn and come to meet you.”

“How will you know where I am? I mean, we’re supposed to be heading for Zurich, but all kinds of things could—”

“Sure, I know. I’ll head generally east and south, but we’ll keep in touch on the transceivers. I’ve got a DF/7 with me, so I can get a fix on your position every time we speak. That way I can keep a constant check on your whereabouts.”

“Very well, Napoleon. You’d better call me at fixed… No! On second thought, you’d better not call me at all. The transceiver might bleep at an awkward moment.”

“Like when you were crossing a frontier? You could always hand the thing to the customs man and say, ‘It’s for you!’… No, I see the point, though. Okay, we’ll do the don’t-call-us-we’ll-call-you bit. When do you want me to stand by for your calls?”

“Every three hours, I should think. Starting between ten and eleven. Then between one and two, and so on. If I miss out on one, listen for me at the next. Right?”

“Right, Colonel!”

“And Napoleon—don’t forget to make with the fixes, eh? As an illegal —er—cargo, I may have to travel most of the way cooped up somewhere. And I may not know within hundreds of miles where I am.”

“Okay,” Solo said. “Take it easy, boy.”

“I think I must go now, Napoleon. We are slowing down. It may be because the frontier is near.”

“Off you go, then. Let the Don flow quiet to the sea.”

“What was that?”

“A quotation. Let it pass. It means ‘I’ll be listening at ten.’”

Solo went back to sleep until six o’clock. At eight, having showered, shaved, checked out of the hotel, and hired a car, he was on the Sint Pietersstraat.

Hendrik van der Lee was already at work, covering a huge sheet of paper with hieroglyphics as he held the telephone clamped to one ear. He waved Solo to a seat and went on talking.

"… from the Rembrandtsplein, did you say? And then out on the Arnhem motor road?… Yes, of course. But look, boy, we have to make sure… Very well, then; you do that. But remember you have to have witnesses who saw her leave… Sure I will, then. But first see what the chambermaid has to say, eh?…"

Eventually he replaced the instrument on its cradle and turned to Solo with a crooked smile. "Hello, you," he said. "You wouldn't *believe* the trouble we have. There's this little fellow, a military attache of one of the Latin American countries. They want the lowdown on his private life—but, sure, the man's so *active*; moving from girl to girl from place to place so fast that my people cannot tell whether it's a miss or a missile he's after!"

"My heart bleeds for you," Solo said. "Can I please use your shortwave transmitter again to call Waverly?"

"You can that. Though it'll be a rare shock to the dear fellow, I doubt not."

Solo shook his head. It would be just after two in the morning in New York. "Waverly never goes to bed before half-past one or two," he said. "With luck I'll get him before he's got his head down for the night!"

"Well, ask the lad how things are, for me," Van der Lee said, "for I've had no word from him for many a long month."

"Oh, come now! That's enough of your Celtic hyperbole!" Solo chided. "It can't be more than a week since you were in touch with him."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Well, he must have been in contact to arrange about our meeting."

"Our meeting? I don't follow you at all." The Irishman was staring.

"You mean he didn't? You weren't tipped off I was coming?"

Van der Lee shook his head.

"You hadn't come to the Terminus especially to contact me? Our meeting was a coincidence? But that's fantastic! I never thought of asking…"

And a few minutes later, when Waverly's irascible voice was crackling over the ether, Solo asked, "How come you hadn't warned Tufik—Van der Lee, I should say—that I was coming? I mean, after I had received the tickets and room reservation you sent, I naturally expected to meet

someone, either here or on the journey. But weren't you leaving it a bit vague if you—"

"Tickets?" Waverly's voice interrupted. "Reservation? Have you taken leave of your senses, Mr. Solo? I have made no communication with you since you left."

Solo whistled softly. If neither Waverly nor Van der Lee knew anything about that special-delivery letter with the tickets in it, then it meant he had deliberately been decoyed to the hotel! Which in turn meant that someone —the person who had tried to run him down in Paris, presumably—had changed his mind and decided to attend to him in Holland.

But why?

If they were going to shoot at him when he was on a balcony or knock him on the head and abduct him from a hotel room, why did this have to be done in The Hague? After all, there were plenty of balconies and plenty of hotel rooms, in Europe!

There could be only one answer—because the person of persons who had to do the shooting and abducting found it convenient. And in practice, surely, this must mean that they had to be in The Hague; they were unable to leave the city… and so, having failed in Paris, they arranged for Solo to come where they were.

The instigators of both decoy and attempted kidnapping, it seemed obvious, must be the men behind the escape network; they had somehow found out that somebody was asking too many questions and they had tried to remove him.

The realization didn't get Solo much further forward. He had asked a lot of questions in a lot of places. Many of the people he had questioned had themselves demanded information of others—who had in their turn probably talked. And the people who were after him could have found out from any of them; he had no means of knowing where the leak had occurred. His discovery that he had been duped therefore gave him no pointers from which he could deduce anything about the network or its operators.

It had, on the other hand, even if coincidentally, brought him into contact with Van der Lee. And it had made him realize that he might have misjudged the girl Annike, in thinking her a party to the kidnapping!

When he had spoken to Waverly the previous night, it had been mainly to hear about Illya Kuryakin's visit to Prague and the reason for it. He had

said little about his own researches. He filled in the details of these now, and as soon as Waverly had signed off, he turned back to the fat man in the wheelchair and said, “There’s the sum total of my investigations to date! About the only positive thing about them is that I know now that—at least mentally—I owe your little girl an apology.”

“My little girl?”

“Annike. She is still with you, isn’t she? I’m afraid I’d been thinking she was responsible for my being knocked on the head. I figured she’d engineered my return to the Terminus and suggested I needed a coat simply because she knew there was somebody up in my room waiting to sap me.”

“Well now,” Van der Lee said, “I don’t know about that at all. But Annike herself is away for a couple of days, Mr. Solo. She had two owin’ from the bank holiday period, and she asked could she take them now. She’ll not be back until the day after tomorrow, I’m afraid. Can I give her a message?”

Solo shook his head. “I guess not. You don’t know where she went, do you? I kind of like making apologies to blondes!”

“Ah, no. That I don’t. Her time’s her own when she’s away out of this.”

The agent sighed. “Okay then. I’ll be on my way… unless you have any second thoughts about that information I wanted to buy from you?”

It was the fat man’s turn to shake a massive head. His jowls quivered in negation as he said regretfully, “A rule’s a rule, Mr. Solo. Even among friends. Anyway, I doubt if it would be much use to you if I could talk—a name, a description, a probability of whereabouts. Which you’ll latch on to soon enough yourself if Mr. Kuryakin’s lucky. You already know they were asking about you… and you’ve had proof of why! That’s all, I guess.”

Solo shook hands. “I’ll get along then. And thanks anyway.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Solo. Always a pleasure. And one thing. Wait’ll I tell you: remember—it’s not always the new ones that travel the best…”

“Not always the new ones…?” echoed Solo with a puzzled frown.

But the Moroccan-Irishman refused to elaborate his hint—if hint it was—and Napoleon Solo went his way with the riddle unsolved, leaving the man in the wheelchair smiling blandly as he pulled a huge pile of daily newspapers toward him and reached into his pocket for a fistful of different colored pens.

Solo had rented a Citroen DS21, a splendid car for covering a lot of ground quickly. Having skirted Antwerp and Brussels, he managed to make

the gray, cobbled central *place* of Namur in time to buy beer and *charcuterie* and bread before the stores closed for lunch.

Then, taking advantage of the midday traffic lull, he drove rapidly across the ragged, untidy Belgian plain, with it dull and grimy little towns, until he reached the Ardennes. Shortly before two o'clock, he pulled off the road not far from Bastogne and prepared to eat. Around him, the undulating country fell away in a series of interlocking wooded curves. And over all these acres of trunk and branch and dead leaf, the sky—which had been becoming more and more overcast since early morning—stretched a sullen yellow canopy.

Wind moaned in the pines above Solo's head and stirred the needles around the boles of the trees further down the hill. It looked as though it was going to snow.

He sat for a while with the engine running and the heater on, waiting for Illya's call to come through on the transceiver.

They had had time only to exchange a few words on the ten o'clock transmission—Solo had been parked behind a highway cafe where he had stopped for coffee—before Kuryakin had been forced to hide the baton because his chauffeur was coming around to talk to him. From the fix Solo had been able to take from the small but sophisticated machine he carried in his valise, he judged the Russian to have been somewhere between Wels and Gmunden, in Austria.

When he came through again at one minute to two, he told Solo that they had made very little progress during the day. Apparently the network preferred to travel mainly at night. He had been in the back of an empty cattle truck, a hearse, and a trailer truck since they had abandoned the electrical delivery truck near Linz hours before. He had no idea where they were now.

Solo made it somewhere near the Alter See, a few miles from Salzburg.

He finished his lunch and drove on into Luxembourg. On the eastern slopes of the Ardennes, snow had already fallen. There was a thin coating beneath the trees, and occasionally, along the surface of the twisty road near Esch-sur-Sure, powdery white trails snaked toward him in the wind. Farther south in the Grand Duchy, the fall had been heavier. Snow lay thickly on branches and roofs, filling the furrows between iron-hard ridges of plowland.

But the streets of the capital were still bone dry. Solo slithered the DS around the cobbled square in front of the minuscule palace and crossed the high bridge to the biggest building in Luxembourg—the great gray mansarded rectangle housing the headquarters of the European Iron and Steel Federation. Beneath him, in the chasm that cleaves the city into two fairytale halves, lights were already gleaming in the dusk below the turreted cliffs.

He drove on down the broad main shopping avenue, passed the railway station, and took the road for Thionville and Metz.

By the time he was due to pull off the road and wait for Illya's next transmission, he was in the middle of the industrial complex between Metz and Sarrebruck. It was like a scene from some medievalist's idea of hell. Although the snow had not yet reached here, the night had come early with an unnatural overcast, and against the livid sky rows of gaunt iron chimneys belched flame. From factory to black factory, huge metal pipes fifteen feet in diameter writhed across the blasted countryside like the entrails of some galactic robot—bridging roads and railway yards, swerving around tips, linking furnaces and works and mines. And over it all, sandwiched between the fiery clouds and the dead surface of the earth, the polluted air hung sulphurous and heavy. Even with the Citroen's windows wound up, Solo could smell it in the car through the ducts of the ventilation system.

It was time for him to stop, but he did not know quite what to do. The road was narrow and full of traffic. The sidewalks, below the high corrugated iron fencing, were crowded with homegoing workers. The few parking spaces he found were too busy—for although he did not have to have total privacy, holding the baton to his mouth and operating the direction-finding equipment would be bound to excite attention in any place that was not at least comparatively quiet!

Finally he saw a patch of dusty grass bounded by a hedge white with some airborne waste. It was too public a place to carry out his task, but at least he could leave the car. He steered up over the sidewalk and stopped the DS by the hedge.

Waiting until the press of cyclists and walkers had thinned, he got out with his equipment and looked around.

On the far side of the road was a red brick building surrounded by transformers and generator housings and gantries bristling with insulators

and wires. In front of it, tubs full of dispirited flowers bordered a parking lot.

Beyond the hedge, stunted trees punctuated the rusty topography of an automobile junkyard. He could see, beyond the piles of crumpled fenders, the concertinaed witnesses to death and disaster and moments of inattention, a wooden hut by the entrance gate. It should be quiet enough in there, in the dark, for his purpose—provided he could get past the man on the gate.

Or was there, perhaps, another way in, a back entrance?

Strolling casually, he found that there was. A little way along the road, a lane cut up between the yard and the high brick wall of a foundry. And a hundred yards along the lane, there were tire tracks in the mud going through a gap in the hedge. Glancing swiftly back to make sure he was unobserved, Solo slipped though.

A few minutes later, transceiver in hand, he was sitting comfortably enough on a pile of used tires, completely hidden by the stacks of wrecked ears.

The larger heaps consisted of motor bodies from which everything of value had been removed—mangled steel skeletons minus engines, wheels, instruments, springs, transmissions, seats and even the trim from the doors. But between these bigger piles there was a variety of other scrap.

There was a mound of radiator cores, another of bolt-on-wheels, a third of bench seats, mildewed and torn, with springs and stuffing leaking forlornly from their worn surfaces.

A pile of cylinder blocks from which the pistons and valves had been removed lay next to a great tangle of exhaust piping. And between the layers of unidentifiable pieces— the sheared-off fenders, bumper guards, side panels and rubbing strips—an occasional whole vehicle, or what was left of it, stood out.

There, for instance, was an American roadster that had obviously been in a head-on crash—the wheels and engine were in the passenger compartment, and the whole of the vast hood was crumpled into nothing, like a sheet of tissue. On the other side was an Italian minicar that had been squashed almost flat in some unimaginable collision. In contrast there were several trucks that looked as though they had died peacefully of old age. There was an old Unic with grass growing out of the remains of its driver’s seat that must have been rusting quietly there since the year one. Beyond it

was a delivery van that couldn't have had more than two square inches of its paneling that hadn't been dented or scratched—but that couldn't have been more than two years old at the outside. And nearer to Solo was a dump truck on which the back and sides were literally falling to pieces.

It was odd, though, the agent thought idly, how different parts of a vehicle deteriorated at different rates. The engine of that one, for instance, looked quite clean and well oiled, from what he could see through the half-opened hood panel. Absently, he rose to his feet and sauntered over.

Abruptly he stiffened. He stepped up to the derelict in half a dozen determined strides. The same white dust that covered the leaves on the hedge lay thickly over everything in the yard.

Except, it seemed, in the case of this truck…

He peered into the cab. The seat was threadbare, the rubber floor mat worn through, the controls shabby in the extreme. Yet there was hardly a trace of the all-pervading dust… and the cabs of the others were covered.

Quickly and silently, he walked around and lifted off the hood panel. The engine was positively gleaming. The plugs looked new, and the leads must have been replaced within the last few weeks. He unscrewed one of the caps on top of the battery. The cells were full.

Solo hurried over to the other trucks. As might have been expected, their engines were caked in dried grease, the wiring cracked, the top surface of everything strewn thickly with the white dust. The one with the dustless cab might just have been sold to the junk man, of course… but it looked to him much more as though it had been there for some time but had recently been restored to running order. It had been left looking decrepit deliberately, although in fact it could probably run quite well.

Why?

What use could anyone have for what was in effect a "Q-truck," hidden in a junkyard?

Unbidden, Tufik's parting comment leaped into Solo's mind. "It's not always the new ones that travel the best."

He dropped to his hands and knees. The street lamps, reflecting an adequate light over the rest of the yard, didn't help much at ground level. But as far as he could see, there were faint tracks leading from the truck's front wheels to the gap though which he had entered.

And suddenly, in a flash of inspiration, he saw a reason. He saw why someone could want a serviceable truck disguised and kept hidden in a

scrapyard. He saw why it could be important that the vehicle, however well it ran, should appear to an outsider to be derelict. “It’s not always the new ones…”

The transceiver in his hand was bleeping. Kuryakin was on the air.

Solo pulled up the antenna and thumbed the button. He sank down once more on the pile of tires and spoke softly into the microphone. He was smiling.

“Channel open,” he said. “Come in, Illya… but before you say anything answer me a question: apart from the furniture van you left Prague in, has the rest of your journey been done in trucks and vans that have had their day? Old crates fit for the junk heap?… It has?… Then pin back your Russian ears and listen: I think I’ve found out how the network does the trick!…”

Chapter 13

A Parley Between Friends

"I AM VERY PLEASED, Napoleon," Kuryakin said. "Tell me about it… You can talk for some time because my—er— conductor has gone off to find some food. We are both hungry."

"Okay. Tell me first, though—where are you? Or don't you know?"

"This time I do. We had to *walk* across the border. We left the trailer truck in some Godforsaken village near Berchtesgaden, but on the Austrian —"

"The trailer truck," Solo interrupted, "was it by any chance left in a junkyard?"

"Well, yes it was, as a matter of fact! How did you know? That's all the thing was fit for, the junkyard, believe me!"

"I do believe you, Illya. You've no idea how pleased it makes me to hear it!… But you were saying…"

"About the frontier. Yes, we sneaked over without being spotted. The actual border is not very well defined in that area. We seemed to walk over half the mountains in Europe. Part of the time we were above the snow line and I was frozen! Then at last we came to another village tucked away in a fold of the hills—and I was told we were in Germany. Big deal!"

"You said you knew where you were now."

"Still only fifteen or twenty miles from Salzburg. We picked up a closed truck at this village—"

"From a junk heap again, I suppose?"

"Kind of. From a lot behind a garage full of unbelievably old cars. They were labeled for sale… Anyway, we pried out this truck and drove to a little place called Siegsdorf, just off the Salzburg-Munich Autobahn. There's a river, a railway station, a beer cellar, a *Gasthof* —and us. And we're stuck unseen in the back of an old heap. Or at least I am!"

"When are you leaving, Illya?"

“‘At night’ is all I’m told. I think we’re supposed to get into Switzerland through the tunnel beneath the Boden-See—and I imagine they want to wait until the night shift is on again. It seems easier for escaped murderers.”

“Especially the way this routine works. Look… Illya… Waverly briefed you on such background as we have, didn’t he?”

“I think so.”

“Well, it all figures, man. It all figures. Listen—Waverly was picked up in an ancient Minerva taxi that nobody has ever seen before or since, right?… He met the men with the new passport in a lane leading to a junkyard, if I remember correctly—and they were standing by an old truck.”

“Yes, Napoleon. That’s right, but—”

“Mathieu, the man the French were after, got away from Paris in a dust cart… *and it was of a pattern that is obsolete now*, the kind you’d only find in a junkyard. He changed into a ‘beat-up delivery van,’ to quote my friend in the Police Judiciare. And then they lost the trail near Avallon—where there are several yards full of wrecks from the dangerous section of N.6. What d’you bet that van ended up in one of those yards, eh?”

“I’m sure you are right.”

“Neither the dust cart nor the delivery van have ever been found. Nor has the prewar dump truck in which the insurance embezzlers were traced as far as Limoges before they disappeared into thin Spanish air. Nor has the van from which I escaped near Maastricht the day before yesterday—although I was telephoning the police and Interpol within minutes of leaving it. Nor, I am sure, has the old deux chevaux that nearly ran me down in Paris.”

“Napoleon,” Illya said. “This sounds most conclusive, but—”

“Right now, I’m actually in a junkyard,” Solo continued excitedly. “This program comes to you by courtesy of the European Iron and Steel Federation, Oxydized Division… and among the rust is a truck that looks finished but has been restored mechanically to fair running condition.”

“Napoleon…”

“What’s the odds that all these mysterious disappearances, Minerva and all, have been into junkyards? What better place can you think of for hiding old vehicles? And conversely, suppose that a whole string of yards like this, a chain of them right across Europe, were fitted up, each with a ‘Q’ vehicle

like the one I found here—what better system could you find for running a clandestine transport service?”

“If you would just let me—”

“It’s perfect! There are wrecking yards everywhere, all along the length of every traffic artery on the Continent. There have to be, with the amount of accidents there are. And as far as the network goes, it’s simple—the escapee is taken a certain distance in one of the trucks or whatever. Nobody pays any mind to an old truck—and they always travel at night anyway, you say. Also, there’s nobody to complain about the truck being improperly used, as it doesn’t belong to anyone.”

“Yes, that’s it. And you see—”

“If there is any doubt, however, or if for security reasons they want to switch vehicles, then they just rum into the nearest yard on their list, leave the truck and continue the journey in another tattered wreck that’s ready waiting for them. They use the yards in fact exactly like horsemen and coaches used to use the stages, the coaching inns.”

“I’d like to say just a word. One word—”

“But it’s perfect! It’s brilliant! A near write-off is difficult to identify. In the yards, nobody is likely to notice the absence of one vehicle and the addition of another. After all, one wreck is much like another! Even at the frontiers, I guess, they could pretend to be driving the thing through as scrap. It’s easy enough to forge papers verifying a deal like that.”

“*Napoleon*!” Illya Kuryakin said loudly and firmly into the transceiver. “You are absolutely right. I know this. I can prove it!”

“Eh? What’s that? How do you know?”

“That is exactly how the network operates. My chauffeur told me.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so, for God’s sake!” Solo grumbled. “What is this fellow like, anyway? He seems the only member of the gang we’ve actually run up against.”

“He’s a short man but very tough. He looks like a walnut on legs.”

“Not by any chance with a great jaw jutting out? A huge blue chin?”

“That’s the one! Why—do you know him?”

“He tried to persuade me to come for a ride… and he wasn’t going to charge me anything at all,” Solo said grimly.

“His name is Bartoluzzi. He’s a Corsican—and he used to be on the *poids lourds*, the long-distance heavyweight trucks. He was doing it for

twenty-five years, with a break during the war; that's why he knows the European road network like the back of your foot…"

"The back of your *hand*, Illya."

"He's very interesting about the organization, Napoleon. But, oh dear! It's become such a bore."

"What do you mean?"

"He thinks he's tremendously tough. He probably is. But you see—the man I'm impersonating is very tough too. So Bartoluzzi feels he has to spend the whole time boasting about just how tough, how ruthless, how crafty he is. And to keep in character, I have to try to go one better, boast even more, act even more unscrupulous."

"Well?"

"You know I am not a violent man," the Russian said plaintively. "Also there is the matter of the cold food and always eating cooped up in some confined space."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

"That and the continual effort to speak in a snarl or a growl or with a deep voice—it's giving me indigestion!"

Solo laughed. "It'll broaden your horizons," he said. "But I'm glad your friend is talkative. Maybe you can get him to Tell All about the other members of the organization."

"That would be impossible, Napoleon."

"I don't see why. I mean, if he has already told you—"

"It would be impossible because there isn't any organization."

"You're out of your mind! You just told me… you just said…"

"No—that's literally true. There's no *organization*. And our friends can hear no talk, no underworld gossip about the deal, because there is nobody *to* talk; incredible as it seems, Bartoluzzi is in it alone."

"You can't mean…?"

"The truth of the matter is, it's a one-man show!"

Chapter 14

The Retreat Of Illya

NAPOLEON SOLO'S characteristic low whistle of astonishment filtered clearly through the gauze of the miniature speaker. Holding the baton in the gloom of the old truck, Kuryakin raised a blond eyebrow in amusement.

"But that's unbelievable!" Solo's voice exclaimed. "Unbelievable!"

"True, nevertheless," the Russian replied soberly. "He's explained it all to me in the greatest detail, boasted about it. And although it seems incredible at first, you'll see when you think about it that it's the only sensible way to do the job, given the limitation that, necessarily, only a single job can be done at one time."

"Yes, but… it *can't* be true, Illya! I mean there are masses of other people involved. I know there are. Even in the few cases we know of. Take Waverly, for instance—there was the driver of the taxi, there was the ferryman, there were the three men in leather coats, to say nothing of the mysterious Willem and the missing crew member of his boat. Or take your own case; besides your driver, there are at least two—no, three!—others involved. The girl, the night watchman, and the genuine driver of the furniture van. There must have been a minimum of three men on Mathieu's dust cart to make the crew convincing. And there was the pilot of the plane to Corsica, too. So how can you say—"

"I said there's no organization as such," Kuryakin interrupted. "I said the organization, the network itself, was a one-man show. I didn't say nobody ever helped him."

"Then…?"

"But he never uses professional underworld help. There's no recognized gang. That's why there's no underworld gossip, as I said. He recruits his help from all over… and the extraordinary thing is, they have no idea what

they are doing! None of them knows he is part of an escape organization carrying international crooks beyond the reach of justice!”

“How can that be?”

“He has invented clever and often involved reasons. He has painstakingly built up elaborate covers to account for the presence of the escapees. And the helpers never realize who they are!… The proprietors of the junkyards, for example, mostly think they are turning a blind eye to some minor racket involving the reregistering of stolen cars; those whose yards are near frontiers think they are being paid to help with the smuggling of a few bottles of liquor or a few cases of cigarettes in an untraceable vehicle; the helpers on each side of the Iron Curtain believe they are assisting political refugees. The plane to Corsica would have been no problem because Bartoluzzi himself is a Corsican, and so was Mathieu.”

“And Waverly’s little lot? If I remember rightly, they spoke of a series of people using that route. Doesn’t that sound professional?”

“It is professional. But they still don’t know. Bartoluzzi was using an existing network there. The Minerva was probably his own, but the rest of the routine belonged to an ultraright-wing group that occupies itself with clandestinely returning ex-Nazis to Germany, using a few of the more venal Dutch for additional staff on the way. I expect he offered to contribute handsomely to their funds if they would allow him to use their facilities this once. From Denmark, it was very convenient, you see.”

“Remarkable!” Solo said admiringly. “I suppose it’s just possible. If he planned very carefully and spaced out his clients right, choosing only those he knew he could handle, he could dodge around doing one after the other, rather like a tramp steamer taking cargo from port to port as it goes along.”

“Exactly. And as an ex-haulage man, he’s known to a lot of the people along the route anyway. Half the customs and immigration personnel at the frontiers seem to be old friends for a start!”

“And this, no doubt, is why nobody knew how to get in touch with the organization in the underworld, why nobody ever knew if they were acceptable as clients until *he* contacted *them*—there was nobody to contact unless he himself happened to be in the area; and he’d make contact only if he thought the case was worthwhile and if it worked in with his other commitments geographically.”

“Exactly,” Illya said again, peering through the crack he bad left between the rusty back doors of the truck. “Napoleon, I have to go now—I

can see Bartoluzzi through the trees. He's coming back with the food."

"Okay," Solo's voice said cheerfully. "I'll listen again around nine. In the meantime… *bon appetit*!"

Bartoluzzi had produced—from heaven knew what secret source!—a large, round peasant loaf, a carton of hot sauerkraut with four huge wursts, a great wedge of Emmenthaler cheese, and two bottles of Schluck.

As he poured the wine, he told Illya of what he had discovered at the back doors of the little town—speaking in the bragger's third person so often adopted by monomaniacs. "Bartoluzzi saw," he said, "in the local newspaper that they have suspected your getaway from Paris. He has been cunning enough to have got you thus far without them once seeing you. But he has to be careful. Bartoluzzi must use all his skills, for the paper says that they suspect you are heading southwest. They suspect!" He laughed contemptuously. "They will need more than suspicion to match the guile of Bartoluzzi!"

In his turn, Illya laughed too. He elbowed the door open and spat realistically into the night. "I'd like to see the frontier guards who could stop me getting through once I'd made my mind up!" he rasped.

"Fortunately, the question will not arise. Bartoluzzi has arranged all so that no guard will see you."

"Bartoluzzi arranges things well; he has a talent for it," Illya said in a conciliatory tone. (The style of speech was catching!) "But tell me—such things cannot be arranged in a day. It takes time to organize. Bartoluzzi could not do all this without planning. Even I could not. Tell me… how did this thing begin?"

Over the outthrust of the huge chin, eyes gleamed in the dusk. "To many, I would say, 'Mind your business.' But you are a man. You have done things such as a man might do…" He paused, swallowed the remainder of a mouthful of sausage, and shot the Russian a glance before he continued.

"I will tell you. I was born in a small village near Venaco, right in the center of Corsica. My family was very poor. They never took vacations or left the village. But sometimes, once every two or three years, I was asked by the local *cure* to go with other children to the coast, to see the sea. We would get in an old bus and go for the day to Aleria, to Folelli, or even perhaps to Corso, near the Capo Russo—the red cape. It was very beautiful.

And all the time I was a child I wanted nothing more than to be near the sea all the time.

“I would have liked to be a fisherman or to work on the boats that went from Bastia and Ajaccio to Nice and Marseille. But for people like us it was impossible. One had to work all day long on the land to get enough to eat. And so as a young man I became just another peasant in the mountains. But I never forgot the sea. Always in my heart I wanted to live beside it—to see the sun rise over the horizon, to watch how the colors changed all the day long, to listen to the fury of the waves in the wintertime. And then, when my parents died, I went to the coast, but I could get no work. And so I stowed away on a boat and I got to Marseille. But still I could not get work on the sea—I had no experience, I did not know the right people. All I could manage was to work as a mate on the poids *lourds*, the huge transport trucks that went between Marseille and the north.

“By and by I became a driver, and then I had my own trucks and I made a little money. And I saved. But still I could not find what I wanted. It is not much, you would think, for a man to want. I did not desire riches. All I wanted was a cottage from which I could regard the sea, a place to retire.

“But the sea has become a preserve for the rich. Every inch of coast is parceled out, each stone has its price—and the price is too high for people such as us. But I determined, nevertheless, that I too would have my rich man’s morsel. I swore that I would get my cottage on a cliff.”

Bartoluzzi stopped talking and stared unseeingly into the tenor of the dark truck. He drained the enamel mug beside him and poured more wine.

“Three years ago,” he went on slowly, “I found the piece of land I wanted. It was secluded, it was covered in olive trees, it looked out to sea. It was on the Corniche d’Or. There was already a *cabanon* there where I could live—but I could also build more if I wished. It was of course very expensive—unbelievably expensive. I put down every penny I had saved, and that only bought me an option.

“And then I realized that however hard I saved, however hard I worked, I would never be able to raise enough to complete the purchase. Or if I could persuade them to wait, I would be too old to enjoy the place by the time I could take possession of it. And so I decided—quite suddenly—to find other means. If a man’s work was not enough to gain him the small thing he wanted out of life, then life must be maneuvered and manipulated in such a way that the thing could be done.”

“What made you decide to do… this?” Kuryakin asked in a curiously gentle tone.

The determined jaw swung around toward him like the prow of a ship. “It seemed right that I should help others, the less fortunate ones, such as I had been,” Bartoluzzi said simply. “It was right that my own salvation should be through the salvation of others. Also, through my experience in transport, I already had the knowledge and the means to carry it out.”

“You were not worried about the law?”

“The law?” The nut-faced little man spat scorn. “The law is an abstraction! Which side of the law you are on is a matter of chance. If you are on the right side, you cheat and lie and steal and they call you a smart businessman. If you do the same things and you are on the wrong side, they call you an embezzler and they put you in prison. If you are on the right side and you kill, they give you medals; if, like yourself, you are on the wrong—then again they execute you or they shut you up forever. Don’t speak to me of the law…”

“Yes, a curse on it. Let a man take what be needs—and the devil take those who would thwart him!” Illya growled, suddenly remembering that he was supposed to be a bank robber and a killer. He changed the subject. “And have succeeded this way in… raising… the necessary capital?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Bartoluzzi replied. “Two years have passed since I made my decision; fifteen months since I did the first job—for I had to spend a great deal of time planning and making contacts. But if I kept up a flow of operations like yours, my friend”—he glanced at the briefcase lying by Illya’s feet—“I could probably make it in another three or four years.”

“So long? At the prices you charge? It must be expensive land indeed!”

“It is. And do not forget, a fortune has to be dispensed to those helping me. They may not comprehend exactly what they are doing, but they know well enough that it is against the law. And silence comes expensive!”

“True. It is a long time, even so.”

“It would have been twenty years, had I not started in this business. But do not worry on my account. If things go well in certain directions I shall in fact not even have to wait the three or four years.”

“But you said…”

“I said it would take three or four years with cases like yours. In the case of people paying more, much more, evidently it would take less.”

“Impossible! Nobody would pay more than I have! No one!”

“No *one*, perhaps,” Bartoluzzi agreed craftily. “But an *organization* might—an organization that was all-powerful.”

“An… organization?” Kuryakin repeated, trying to mask his interest.

“Certainly. An organization with an interest in helping such unfortunates avoid the spitefulness and malice of the fellowmen. An organization that might have an interest in contacting certain clients and making use of their talents, furthering their careers instead of just removing them from danger temporarily. Such people would pay more.”

“And such an organization has already contacted you? On those lines?”

“Ach… it is better not to speak of these things,” Bartoluzzi said, becoming suddenly evasive. “Come—it is time we were on our way…”

Kuryakin tried once more to draw the little man out on the subject of whoever was trying to buy into his organization. “One would be interested to hear more of such a group,” he said, “if it existed; particularly if it was, as you said, all-powerful

“You don’t want to bother yourself about that, friend,” Bartoluzzi said. “A man like you. What need does a strong man have for others?”

“True,” the Russian said hoarsely. “I manage my own affairs at that. And I’d like to see the organization that can stop me!” He climbed back into the van and pulled the doors shut. Bartoluzzi returned to the drivers’ cab—and a moment later they were winding up the hill past the *Gasthof* toward the main road leading to Munich and the west.

Three hours later, the Corsican pulled up in a deserted parking area not far from Wangen. There were several rolls of carpet and linoleum in the van, and they had decided that Illya was to travel through the tunnel incarcerated in one of these. According to a spurious bill of lading, they were consigned to a decorator in Zurich. This last stop before the frontier was to enable him to get properly lost inside one of the rolls!

As soon as the engine cut out, he was aware that the weather had changed for the worse. There was a regular pattering on the top and sides of the vehicle, and every now and then it lurched in a gust of wind. When Bartoluzzi came around to open the doors, the Russian saw that the night was full of driving sleet.

Turning up his collar, he helped the Corsican manhandle the heavy rolls into a suitable position in the back of the van. It didn’t take them long, but by the time they had finished, Illya was drenched from head to foot.

Grasping his jacket by the lapels, he shook the material violently in an attempt to get rid of some of the moisture. At the same time he tossed his head to clear his face of the streams of water running down from his hair.

A heavy truck rumbled past, the beams of its headlamp, brightly illuminating the driving sleet, the parked van, and the two men standing by the open doors. In the vivid light Bartoluzzi's face, with its staring eyes and jutting chin, was abruptly changed into a mask of murderous hate!

Before he realized what was happening, Kuryakin found himself hurled backward into the body of the van as the Corsican shoulder charged him with brutal force. The doors of the vehicle slammed, and a bar dropped into place. A moment later, they roared out onto the main road.

Astonished, the Russian drew the transceiver from his pocket and tried to call up Solo. But either his teammate was otherwise occupied, or he was calling a little too early. There was no answer to his signal.

Not long afterward, the van shuddered to a halt. He could hear running footsteps, voices shouting commands.

Light flooded into the dark interior as the doors were jerked open. Facing him by a roadside police post were half a dozen German militiamen with leveled rifles. Behind them, he could dimly see an officer and Bartoluzzi, waving his arms.

"There you are!" the Corsican was shouting. "Stowing away in my van, he was! There he is. That's Kurim Cernic, the murderer who escaped from Prague… I'd know that face anywhere. Arrest him! Take him away! He was trying to get across the border in my van!"

Keeping out of the line of fire of the rifles, the officer motioned Kuryakin to descend. Cold steel embraced his wrists as handcuffs clicked shut.

Still stupefied with astonishment, the Russian allowed himself to be led into the guardroom. What had happened? What had given him away? For if Bartoluzzi had denounced him as the killer Cernic, it could only be for one reason—because he had in fact discovered that Kuryakin was an imposter!

At that moment he caught sight of himself in a mirror hanging over an old-fashioned mantelpiece behind the duty officer's desk. And at once he realized what had betrayed him to the Corsican.

Soaked by the storm of sleet, the dye that had darkened his blond hair to Cernic's color had run—and now his face was grotesque, streaked from one side to the other with the stain!

Chapter 15

Ambush In The East!

NOW THAT THE mechanics of Bartoluzzi's one-man escape network were known, now that he was morally sure that he had in fact been approached by THRUSH on the lines that Waverly had feared, Kuryakin felt justified in throwing the Corsican, as it were, to the wolves. On the other hand, he could hardly do this in his role as the Czech Kurim Cernic, for the wily Corsican would probably manage to talk his way out of it—especially since the military would be unlikely to take the word of an escaped convict, and Illya had no proof of his allegations. Moreover, as a recognized criminal rather than a political refugee, Kuryakin himself would probably simply be handed over to the East German authorities, who would in turn send him back to Czechoslovakia. Establishing his true identity then might take days, for he was deliberately carrying no papers, and in the meantime Bartoluzzi would have vanished and the trail would be cold.

He would therefore have to come out into the open and tell them now who he was. But this turned out to be more difficult than he had anticipated.

As soon as the Corsican had gone outside the guard room, Illya turned to the officer and said in German: "Now I can speak. You have the opportunity of pulling off a personal coup that will undoubtedly gain you much prestige with your superiors."

The young man stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"I am not Kurim Cernic. I am an enforcement agent of—"

"Be quiet. Of course you are Cernic."

"I tell you I am not. I am *impersonating* Cernic—why do you think there is dye running down my face?—and this man thinks he is illegally taking Cernic out of reach of the authorities."

"You are talking rubbish. If he was doing that, why would he call us in and hand you over to us? Why would he seek the help of the military, of all people?"

“Because he discovered I was an impostor; that I am not Cernic.”

“Now you are talking in riddles. That is enough.”

“He is running an escape service for criminals. Now that he knows I am not a criminal, his organization is in danger so he wants me out of the way —don’t you see?”

“I see it is time you were taken to the cells. Sergeant!”

“But you are making a mistake. I tell you—”

“Silence!… Sergeant, take this man to the cells and place a close guard on him. Transport will be arriving soon with an escort to take him to the East German frontier. Until then he is not to be left alone.”

And so, until some time after midnight, Illya languished in a brightly lit room with barred windows and a peephole in the door through which young soldiers curiously and constantly peered. Judging from scraps of dialogue he could hear through the door, the place was an adjunct to a big frontier post some way down the road. But his escort was clearly coming from farther afield.

At last, nevertheless, he was once again standing handcuffed before the shabby desk in the guardroom. The stain on his face had dried, and now, in the mirror over the fireplace, he looked like nothing so much as a Maori warrior!

An escort of half a dozen soldiers with machine pistols— Belgian FNs, he thought—was drawn up outside the door, and beyond them he could see a vehicle like an Austin Gypsy, its canvas top silhouetted against the lamps bordering the road. The young lieutenant in charge of the escort was receiving his orders from the officer Illya had seen before.

“You will proceed directly northeast through Bayreuth after you have reached Nurnberg. It has been arranged that an escort of East German militia will rendezvous with you at the frontier post just north of Hof, on the new Autobahn. You will deliver this envelope to the officer commanding at the same time as you hand over the prisoner. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Captain.”

As the young lieutenant saluted and reached out for the brown manila envelope, Illya exploded into action.

He had caught sight of the baton transceiver, which had been taken from him when he was searched. It lay on the desk next to the briefcase containing the remainder of the money that was to have been paid to Bartoluzzi as soon as they reached Zurich.

The Russian twisted away from the guards on either side of him and dived for the table. Snatching up the baton in his manacled hands, he hurled himself into the corner of the room as his fingers felt for the controls.

"Channel open," he gasped. "Listen, Napoleon… listen: the plan has misfired… Bartoluzzi has spotted me, and I have been handed over to the authorities as Cernic—"

Men flew at the Russian from all directions. Gun butts thudded into his back, hands tore at his shoulders, and an arm encircled his neck from behind as he crouched down facing the wall in a desperate attempt to reach his teammate. "…taken with military… East Germany… back to Prague…" he panted between efforts to beat off the soldiers.

But the sheer weight of numbers was too much for him. The transceiver, wrenched from his hands, fell to the ground and was smashed under a heavy boot; Kuryakin, heaving manfully against the overwhelming odds, was finally subdued.

A few minutes later, bruised, bloodied and only half-conscious, he was dragged out to the truck and pushed into the back with the escort, and they took off for Munich, Nurnberg and the north.

Napoleon Solo was worried. Having failed to find anyone to talk to in the office of the junkyard, he had traversed the chalet-and-pine-tree fringe of the Vosges, cut through the bare slopes on which in summer the magnificent vines of Alsace grew, and sped down the long, shallow Rhine valley between Strasbourg and Mulhouse. He was now approaching the outskirts of Basle… and he didn't know what to do.

He had waited until eleven o'clock for Illya's call, and nothing had happened. He had, on the other hand, been a few minutes late coming in himself; he hadn't turned the tiny indicator to RECEIVE until ten or eleven minutes after the hour, and it was possible that Kuryakin had transmitted during those few particular minutes.

But unless he was certain that the Russian had in fact reached Zurich, it would not be worth going through the customs and immigration formalities and entering Switzerland via Basle; any other rendezvous would be quicker to make driving around the back of the mountains. Since he had no idea where such a rendezvous would be, however, there was no point actually starting in that direction. Nor was it worth heading for Zurich if he was going to have to waste time coming back again.

The only thing to do, he decided finally, was to wait where he was until Illya came through again. He would lose three hours, but if he pressed on and then discovered it had been in the wrong direction, he might find he had lost even more.

Catching sight of the blue and red neon surrounding the entrance to a roadside restaurant, Solo suddenly realized he was hungry. He had not eaten since his picnic lunch in the Ardennes almost ten hours ago.

He swung the DS off the road and crunched onto the graveled parking lot at one side of the building.

An illuminated sign over a glassed-in portion announced that the place was open from 8 A.M. until 2 A.M., and there was a board at one side on which the bill of fare was displayed in two-inch lettering. Judging from the number of cars still in the lot, business was good.

Solo walked past cars registered in Germany, Switzerland and several departments of France. He was negotiating a group of puddles left by the evening's rain, when he came to a dead stop. His eye, ranging across colored reflections of neon in the pools of moisture, was arrested by the inverted image of a car's license plate. He looked up. The letters *NL* on an oval white plaque surmounted the letters and figures of a Dutch registration.

And the car bearing them was a Fiat 850 coupe in a flamboyant shade of mustard.

The girl was sitting alone at the back of the restaurant. Solo didn't see her at first; he was momentarily swamped by the tide of warmth that submerged him as soon as he pushed through the door. The place had lost the hectic air of early evening—there was just the murmur of voices and the discreet tinkle of cutlery to complement savory aromas spiced with garlic and the background tang of coffee and dark cigarettes. The tables, clothed in red checks, were set in waist-high wooden booths arranged around a vast central *cheminee* bright with copper pans. The agent gave his coat to a waiter in a white linen jacket and looked around for a table.

Only when he glanced past the flames leaping on the great hearth did he see Annike, her blonde head gleaming below the oak beams.

He crossed the room and slid into the vacant seat on the other side of the table.

Her elbows were planted on either side of her coffee cup and her chin was resting on crossed hands. "The *truite aux amandes* is quite good," she

said without looking up, “and they have Gewurztraminer in *pichons*, which is a must.”

“Sold to the gentleman with the hungry eyes,” Solo said. “Though I shall take leave to have a steak after that trout and an avocado with huge prawns before. What are you doing here—if the question is not indiscreet?”

“Waiting for a gentleman to buy me an armagnac.”

“No sooner asked than granted. Waiter!”

“Thank you, kind sir. Now, I’ll answer your question if you’ll answer mine first—what are you doing here, Mr. Solo?” the girl said brightly. Her uptilted nose was slightly red at the tip. She looked as though she had been crying.

“You know what I’m doing here. I’m trying to catch a man who runs an escape service for criminals.”

Annike caught her breath. A tear welled from her left eye and rolled slowly down her cheek. She smiled.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Solo said with a flash of inspiration. “He’s let you down.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s a fair deduction. Somebody had been asking questions about me in your office. You knew who I was, and you engineered it so I should go back to my hotel. Nice girls like you don’t usually arrange for total strangers to be knocked on the head… unless a man they’re in love with asks them to. Ergo, you are in love with someone from the organization. And now, since I know it’s a one-man show, obviously you were in love with the one man. You went to see him on your off days—and evidently, something has gone wrong.”

“The bastard!” the girl said venomously. “Oh, the *salaud*! After all he promised me… and it’s only with some thin-faced cow from Czechoslovakia. I could kill him!”

A waiter was standing at Solo’s side. “Would you care to order, sir?”

“Yes, please. Bring a double armagnac for the lady. I’ll take the avocado with prawns, the trout with almonds, and a porterhouse steak, medium to rare, with salad.”

“Very good, sir. And to drink?”

“I’ll take a *pichon* of the Gewurztraminer.”

After the man had tucked the carbon copy of the order under their tablecloth and gone away, Solo asked, “Tell me, Annike—how did you get

me out of the hotel?”

She rubbed her thumb against her fingers in the universal gesture to indicate money changing hands. “They have very large laundry baskets,” she said, “that go down in the service elevator and then get dumped in the yard.”

Solo finished his meal, and they went out to the parking lot. Annike was wearing blue slacks and a ribbed sweater that clung to the supple outlines of her figure like a second skin. She looked young, desirable, and very vulnerable. “Where’s your boyfriend now?” the agent asked as they reached her car.

“I’ve no idea. He had some job—taking someone from Praha to Zurich, I believe. If that wasn’t just a stall to hide the fact that he’s with that woman.”

“That was no stall. The someone is a friend of mine,” Solo said, taking the baton from his pocket and showing it to her. “I’m expecting to hear from him later on this little gadget. Then we’ll really know where he is.” Absently be thumbed the button.

To their astonishment a confused sound burst from the tiny speaker, and a moment later—distorted but understandable—Illya Kuryakin’s agitated voice: “*… misfired …Bartoluzzi has spotted me, and I have been handed over to the authorities as Cernic… taken with military… East Germany… back to Prague…*”

The line abruptly went dead.

“That’s smart!” Solo said admiringly. “He must have denounced him as Cernic the moment he found out he wasn’t Cernic! That way, he roped in soldiers to take the impostor out of his hair.”

He paused and then added reflectively, “The only thing is, what do I do? Illya will be able to identify himself in time in Prague… but where has your boyfriend got to in the meantime?”

“Bart would never do that,” the girl said decidedly. “Never.”

“Never do what?”

“Let them take away a possible witness against him. I know Bart. And I know the way his mind works. If you ask me, he’s just using the military to get the man across a frontier for which he hasn’t any papers or something. As soon as it’s convenient to him, he’ll contrive to get your friend back again—and after that I wouldn’t rate his chances very high.”

“What do you mean?” Solo asked uneasily.

“He’ll take him to that place of his and kill him. You’ll see.”

“Place? What place?”

“His headquarters. He has a fantastic place in a forest somewhere south of Dresden—a cross between the world’s most comprehensive junkyard and a medieval castle!”

“And you think he’ll hijack the prisoner and take him there?”

“I’m certain of it. The swine,” the girl said vehemently. “The rotten swine… and the woman’s years older than me!”

“Do you know the way to this place? Could you take me there?… You’d like to get your own back, wouldn’t you? Do you know the way?”

The girl stopped and turned to face him. “Of course I know,” she said.

“Crazy!” Solo cried, taking her elbow and turning her toward the row of parked cars. “We’re on our way!”

Emilo Bartoluzzi was not a man to work himself if he could persuade others to do it for him. Having no forged papers suitable for a west-east crossing of the East German frontier with Illya, he had therefore decided to denounce the character he was impersonating and allow the authorities to convey the Russian there for him.

Once he was some way into the country, a rapid change of ownership would have to be effected—because Bartoluzzi had to get hold of the impostor for himself… fast.

There were three reasons for this. The first was to prevent others’ hearing the man’s story. It would not be long before he was able to gain at least some credence for his protestations that he wasn’t really Cernic. Secondly, he had to have the fellow to himself so that he could employ the gentle arts of persuasion and find out who he was and for whom he was working. The tough little Corsican had not worked all this time just to see his carefully planned empire collapse at the first push of the first person to penetrate it.

And thirdly, the man bad to be silenced—for good. He knew far too much about the network to stay alive even in a Czech prison.

Stop him opening his mouth; find out who he was; shut his mouth. Those then were the objectives. And since none of them could conveniently be carried out in the middle of Austria, Switzerland or Western Germany, he had arranged for the military to kindly ferry the victim to a place of his own choosing; his own place.

First, though, the impostor had to be won back from them….

Bartoluzzi followed the army truck carrying Illya at a discreet distance. As soon as he could, he changed vehicles, just in case any of the soldiers recognized the van in which the Russian had been traveling. He ran the vehicle into a junkyard on the outskirts of Munich, paused to have a word with the night watchman, and left in an ex-American army jeep, hand-painted a bright orange and equipped with a civilian registration.

The hood of the jeep flapped dismally, the garish paint was flaking off all over it, and the tires seemed to be almost bald. But there was a highly tuned engine under the battered hood and it ran like the hammers of hell!

Even so, not until they were nearly at Nurnberg did he catch up with the truck again. It had been joined by four motorcycle outriders.

Bartoluzzi accelerated and drove past the convoy. He knew where they were going, and he could afford to press on ahead. Between Bayreuth and Hof, he turned sharp right off the highway and bounced along a narrow lane. Eventually he came to a graveyard of wrecked autos—a large field piled high with the telescoped and concertinaed remains of cars that had come to grief on the Autobahn whose embankment formed one boundary of the property. There were several gaps in the ragged hedge shielding the place from the lane. Bartoluzzi chose the smallest and least used and steered the jeep in among the mounds of scrap.

Toward the back of the yard, just under the embankment, he ran in close to a towering pile of metal and stopped the jeep canted over on an outsize hummock of grass.

From a distance, slanting drunkenly toward the mound of wreckage, it would be indistinguishable from the derelicts surrounding it.

He switched off the engine and jumped to the ground. The rain had ceased, and the clouds had momentarily withdrawn. In the light of the waning moon, he threaded his way through the scrap to an old Dodge three-tonner that was parked among the nettles near the hedge. It looked barely capable of remaining erect on its wheels, but the motor turned sweetly and, in a secret space behind the gaping glove compartment, were papers. These included bills of sale, insurance certificates, an agreement to buy the vehicle for scrap from an East German yard (which had been easy enough, since the yard was his own), and permission to take the truck into the People’s Republic for that purpose.

Easing the old Dodge out into the lane, he drove as quickly as he could to the frontier. Kuryakin had been handed over to the East German police not long before; the motorcycles and the army truck were just turning to start their journey back when Bartoluzzi arrived. He presented his credentials, said he was driving the truck through as scrap, and shook hands with the corporal who stamped his permit. Then, taking the road for Dresden, he set off after the prisoner and escort as fast as he could.

Day was breaking and they were less than twenty miles from the rebuilt city when he caught up. Kuryakin was sitting with six militiamen on a bench running down the back of a mesh-covered Wartburg riot truck. It is doubtful if any of them noticed the ancient Dodge as it rattled abreast of them. In any case the nerve gas from the expertly lobbed grenade worked so fast that they would have had no time to make any comments on it.

All seven of them were out for the count before the Dodge pulled in again to the right-hand side of the road after passing the truck.

Three miles farther on, the road snaked through rising ground in the center of a belt of forest. As the Wartburg slowed for a sharp bend, four shots from a repeater rifle cracked apart the dawn calm and sent birds flapping up from the tree tops in widening circles of alarm.

Behind the starred windshield, the driver and the sergeant beside him leaned together in a crazy embrace and then slid to the floor of the cab.

After the corner, the road dropped away to the right. But the truck went straight on. It bumped over the shoulder, scraped one side on the trunk of a tree, lurched into a hollow and then, gathering speed now, slammed into a fallen trunk and fell over, quite slowly, on one side.

Bartoluzzi was running noiselessly toward it over the carpet of pine needles almost before the echoes of the crash had died away among the sighing of the branches.

He crawled into the space beneath the battered mesh covering and tried to haul Kuryakin into the open air. There was a bruise on the unconscious Russian’s temple, but otherwise he seemed to be undamaged. He was handcuffed to the militiaman on each side of him, however, and the wiry little Corsican was unable to drag all three of them out together. He felt in the pockets of the soldiers and then examined those of the dead sergeant in the cab. There were no keys to be found.

With a grimace of exasperation, he loped off through the trees to the place where he had hidden the Dodge. Five minutes later he was back by

the crashed truck with a surgeon’s saw in his hand.

Once his gruesome task was completed, he pulled Kuryakin clear and carried him—alone now but with an empty handcuff dangling from each wrist—back to his own vehicle. Dumping him in the back, he covered him with a pile of old sacks. The gas from the grenade would keep him quiet for at least another hour.

There was one more thing to do. Bartoluzzi did not know how much, if anything, the Russian had said to his guards. But he could not afford to take chances. It was possible that he had spilled the whole story in an attempt to establish his real identity. And even if they hadn’t believed him, a fragment of the truth might stick.

The Corsican slid a clip of ammunition into an automatic pistol and went back to the scene of the crash.

Six more shots sent the birds wheeling.

Shortly afterward he was on a side road heading south into the forest with the briefcase full of money, which he had recovered from the Wartburg’s cab, on the seat beside him.

Chapter 16

A Murder Is Planned

ILLYA KURYAKIN blinked his way awake. It took some time for his mind to clear, and the blurred images revolving slowly in front of his eyes meant nothing to him at first.

Then, portion by portion, the jigsaw assembled itself—the long wait in the Prague attic… the succession of decrepit vehicles in which he had been ferried half across Europe… the tramp through the snow and the crossing of frontiers… Bartoluzzi's face when the tell-tale streaks of dye told him that Illya wasn't Kurim Cernic… the journey with the soldiers and the sudden realization that the face of the truck driver whose ancient vehicle was passing them was the face of the Corsican…

And the recognition of the innocent-looking plastic grenade full of nerve gas the Corsican had tossed so neatly into the back of the riot truck as he passed.

Kuryakin jerked fully awake. Bartoluzzi was standing in front of him making circular movements with his hands before the Russian's eyes. "So," he said softly, "monsieur Impostor has recovered his senses. So much the better. Bartoluzzi will be able to find out the truth that much more quickly—and then he will be able to deal with the man who has dared to thwart his plans!"

His lips curled back from his teeth, and his eyes flashed venomously as he spat out the last words.

Kuryakin involuntarily flinched back from the fury in his voice. Or at least he tried to. But he found out as soon as he moved that he was far more of a prisoner than he had been in the truck. He was sitting in a stoutly built rustic oak chair. His wrists were wired to the arms, his knees and ankles were wired to the front legs, and there was a wide luggage strap passing across his chest and behind the chair back, which was buckled so tightly that he found it difficult to breathe freely.

Speaking of the truck… his eyes went once more to his own wrists. In front of the electric cord binding each to the arm of the chair, the metal hoop of a handcuff still encircled the flesh. But the companion cuff attached to each by a short length of chain was now empty; the guards were gone.

Yet the steel bracelets that had attached them to Illya remained closed and locked—and there were rust-colored stains splashed across the bright metal and over each of the sleeves of his jacket.

The Russian's eyes widened. "My God!" he cried involuntarily. "Those guards! How did you get the cuffs off them without unlocking them? You didn't…?"

"How do you think I got them off?" the little man snarled. "You think maybe I went for a locksmith or something?"

"You took off their… you… while they were unconscious… But that's monstrous! That's just what happened to the warder in Denmark. How could you do such a thing?"

"It won't make much difference to them now."

"You mean you killed them? You murdered unconscious men in cold blood?"

"It was the only way I could *stop* the bleeding," the Corsican said with a coarse laugh. "You might almost say I killed them in hot blood!"

"And you can joke about it? You're… you're nothing but barbarous."

"We shall see just how barbarous Bartoluzzi can be in a minute," the little man said. "I suppose it's useless asking you who you really are, why you have come snooping into my private affairs, or who sent you?"

"Quite useless."

"As I thought. I can tell a professional when I see one. It would save me a great deal of time—and you a great deal of pain—if you could do the same. For I mean to get that information, and I don't care how I do It. Also I am in a hurry, so that my methods must necessarily be somewhat— er—crude."

"And supposing I was to give you this information—what happens to me then?"

"I shall kill you," Bartoluzzi said simply. "You must pay the price of the knowledge you have gained by your spying. You know too much for the safety of my organization."

"If you are going to kill me anyway, why should I talk then?"

"To save yourself great suffering before you die."

“I have nothing to tell you.”

“Very well. We shall see.” Bartoluzzi sighed heavily and went out.

Left alone, Illya looked desperately around the room. It was a strange place. There were another chair like the one to which he was bound, a huge refectory table slanted across one corner, a roll-top desk littered with paper—and that was all. The rest of the dusty boards, from the hooded cheminee to the gothic embrasure on the far side of the room, were bare. Through the mullioned window, he could see the facade of another wing of the building—a turreted, spired, and battlemented expanse of hewn stone that looked like a castle in a fairy story.

Except that, unlike the fairytale mountains that humped themselves up above flower-strewn fields in story books, the peaks and spurs and bluffs beyond this stronghold were composed of towering heaps of scrap iron that raised rusty fingers at the winter sky. And the horizon all around was formed by the forbidding skyline of the forest.

The Russian looked closer at hand. The tying of his bonds had been an expert job—he could neither reach them with his fingers nor detect the least sign of resilience when he flexed his muscles against them. And there was nothing nearby that could be of any help. At one end of the table, the empty briefcase lay beside two piles of money—one that he had given to Bartoluzzi when he got out of the furniture van, the other that he had been keeping until he got to Zurich… and that had been sent back to the Czech authorities by the German police.

At the other end of the table the remains of a delicatessen-type meal lay in cartons and squares of greaseproof paper. But there was nothing, not a knife or a fork or any thing that could be used as a tool, within sight.

Footsteps echoed in a flagged passageway somewhere out side the door. The Corsican was coming back.

A moment later he was in the room, carrying a small piece of machinery in a cast iron housing, two lengths of high-tension cable, a six inch crank handle, and half a dozen bulldog clips.

“A magneto,” he said proudly, laying the housing on the table with a heavy thump. “A twenty-four volt Bosch from an old dump truck out there. The paras in North Africa used to say there was nothing like them for making people volunteer information!… And it’s nice that we can provide it from stock, as it were. I always knew this junkyard would come in useful one day!”

He laid the rest of his equipment down by the magneto and walked across to Kuryakin's chair. "And now, friend, we will see how sweetly Bartoluzzi can make you sing," he said softly.

Reaching forward, he seized the Russian's shirt and ripped it open from neck to waist in a single powerful gesture.

Napoleon Solo pulled the DS into a parking area in response to a signal from the slender arm projecting from the window of the mustard-colored Fiat in front.

The girl was standing by his door before the Citroen had stopped. "I think we'd better have a little council of war here," she said. "It's getting light, and we may not have the opportunity later on. Also, I think it might be better if I went on alone. You could wait for me in some secluded place."

"I should love to wait for you in some secluded place," Solo said. "But in this case, it's just out of the question. This is my show. It may be dangerous. I couldn't possibly allow you to do anything alone. Now that your ex-boyfriend has tumbled to the fact that my friend's not what he says he is, he'll be on his guard and doubly dangerous."

The girl laughed bitterly. "You don't realize what that man has done to me," she said. "He has made me break the law, risk prison many times. And he is not just my ex-boyfriend. We were going to get married… I heard so many times about the piece of land under the olive tree, the sound of the sea, the hot Mediterranean sun… and… and now… "

For a moment her voice faltered, and then she went on. "I do what I do because I want to. Because I must for my own self-respect. So you see, Mr. Solo, it's not a case of whether or not you permit me to take part. I'm going on to his place anyway; it's just a question of whether you come with me or wait here!"

Solo grinned. "If it's like that, we'd better go together."

"As you wish. We are between Wurzburg and Bamberg. The East German frontier is only about an hour's drive away. You are an American—do you think they will let you cross?"

"I may be an American citizen, but I work for an organization that is supranational. I have papers to prove I work for U.N.C.L.E.—and we are welcomed in the East as much as in the West, fortunately."

"Your papers will get you through right away?"

“Not as quickly as if I had a special permit or a visa. They’ll probably have to phone their headquarters to check that it’s okay to let me through. But it shouldn’t take too long, I guess.”

“I, on the other hand, am well-known. I can pass straight through. Do you not think, as your friend may be in great danger, that it would be best if I went ahead as I suggested? Then, when I have seen how things are at Bart’s place, I can come back to you and we will decide what to do.”

“Yes, but you may find yourself in great danger yourself.”

“Do not worry. I know the paths and tracks of that forest like the back of my hand. Also the place where he lives. I can move secretly there and listen, where it would be impossible for two. Nobody will see me, I promise.”

Solo sighed, “Okay. Seems I have very little choice—and it’s too true that every minute counts if we’re to rescue Illya. But you don’t have to come back to me, not physically. Remember the little baton radio we heard my friend on, outside the restaurant?”

“But yes. It was most convenient.”

“I have another. If I show you how to use it, you can take it with you—and then you can simply call me when you have found out what is happening. After that, you can give me directions and I will come to you. We shall save time that way. And also we can keep tabs on your… on Bartoluzzi. If you don’t mind staying there until I arrive, that is.”

“For this purpose,” Annike said grimly, “it will be a pleasure.”

Illya Kuryakin was unconscious, slumped forward against the retaining strap with his blond head hanging, when the clatter of the helicopter’s rotors broke the silence in the big room.

Bartoluzzi dropped the magneto on the table. Leaving the leads still clipped in position, he ran to the stairs leading to the open air.

From the outside, his retreat presented an even more surrealistic aspect. It had originally been built as a shooting lodge for a Dresden businessman—a kind of Gothic Folly, with turrets and battlements pretentiously hiding what was in fact quite a small house—and it had always looked curiously unreal set in its forest hollow. But surrounded by a turbulent sea of scrap iron as it was now, the place became immediately a creation of the wildest fantasy.

Over a groundswell of bedsteads, cooking utensils, iron railings, disused cookers and lengths of railway track, great crests of heavier stuff swept toward the building in a rusty and remorseless flood—a flood culminating in a tidal wave of smashed car bodies, dented boilers and the skeletons of traction engines that had once, in their day, hauled entire circuses.

Dwarfed by this metal deluge, Bartoluzzi stood waiting. The helicopter sank down from the sky over the mountains forming the border with Czechoslovakia, skimmed across the surf of green tree tops that washed against the foothills, and lowered itself neatly to the ground in an open space between one of the mounds of scrap and the outer wall of the Folly.

A Plexiglas door opened in the machine's nose, and a lithe figure clad in black dropped to the ground.

Black boots laced to the knee strode purposefully across to the porch in which Bartoluzzi was waiting; beneath a form fitting black leather flying suit, the curves of a supple body moved enticingly; on the smooth brow of a black helmet, goggles were pushed up by black-gloved hands.

And the face, thin-cheeked and pale below the oversized lenses, was the face of Marinka, the blonde from the *kavarna* in Prague.

The Corsican shook hands formally and took her up to the room in which Kuryakin was held prisoner. She glanced cursorily at the inert figure and asked, "Has he come up with anything yet?"

Bartoluzzi shook his head. "He may not be the real Cernic, but he's a tough one all the same," he growled. "I was just about to make a change in the method, when I heard your plane."

He picked up an electric soldering iron, rammed the plug into a socket set in the wall beside the door, and laid the tool down on the tiled floor of the cheminee to heat up.

"He's said nothing at all?" the girl demanded. "He hasn't talked one way or the other?"

"Oh, he talked all right. They all talk when the electricity's flowing! But he didn't say anything worthwhile, nothing we could use. Mostly, he was babbling what I took to be his name—it sounded Russian to me—and some nonsense about his uncle."

"His uncle?"

"That's what it sounded like. He even spelled it for me, but I—"

"Do you mean he said he was from U.N.C.L.E.?"

"I think that was it. What does that mean?"

“It’s… kind of an international police organization.”

“This is a flic, a policeman?” Bartoluzzi made an instinctive movement toward the soldering iron, which was beginning to smoke slightly.

“More than that—and you can leave your torture toys. They will do you no good if this is an U.N.C.L.E. agent.”

“But I can make him talk, Marinka. I swear I can.”

“Of course you can. But you’d be wasting your time. Before they go out on assignment, agents of this organization undergo a course of posthypnotic suggestion to make psychological implants in their minds. Without wearying you with detail, the result of this is that—under truth drugs or torture—they will tell you the truth up to a certain point. But that as soon as you start asking questions about their mission, a psychiatric censor, as it were, comes into operation, and their subconscious mind supplies answers that accord with the facts but are not the genuine truth. They have a built-in series of conditioned reflexes. And to break that down would take far more time than you have available. My principals want action. You’ll have to get rid of this man.”

“Yes, yes. Of course I will. If he didn’t talk within the next half hour, I was going to kill him anyway. I have clients waiting in other parts of Europe, and I cannot afford to waste time here trying to discover why a madman should pass himself off as a murderer! I have to go.”

“And the means?”

“Obviously his death must be arranged so that the authorities believe no other person was involved. I had worked out a plan whereby it would seem he had himself escaped from the militiamen and had then come to grief while getting away from the scene of the crash.”

“Good,” the girl said. “Good. You must tell me about it at once…”

“It’s a pretty diabolical scheme,” the voice coming from the transceiver in Solo’s hand said. “Here’s what they plan to do. It appears that there’s an old railway viaduct crossing the head of a valley near here. It was built in the middle of the last century to carry some branch line toward the mountains, but the Germans closed it down and tore up the track in 1933. The bridge is still standing, however, and the old permanent way still exists as a kind of rough track. It’s weed grown and bumpy, but you can apparently get a car down it—at least as far as the viaduct.”

“Bully for me,” Solo said. “And the point is…”

“The viaduct is in a bad state… about to fall down. Apparently the wind and frost have eaten away all the mortar, and it’s practically resting on dry stone pillars now. It’s closed even to foot traffic, and the track is blocked with barbed wire before you get there.”

“You’re beginning to make me feel uneasy.”

“What they’re going to do—they plan to put your friend in the cab of an old truck. He’ll be lightly drugged so that he doesn’t know what’s happening, but he won’t be bound or anything. And then they’ll push the truck out onto the viaduct and…”

“Down will come vehicle, Illya and all?”

“That’s it. The bridge is so shaky that a bicycle might start it crumbling away. A heavy truck will just make it fall down. It won’t bear that much weight.”

“Okay,” Solo said crisply. “Now just how are they going to do this? You say they are going to push the truck out onto the viaduct?”

“Not literally. The barbed wire barriers can easily be displaced. And the track approaching the bridge is on a downhill slope which continues at a slight incline across the viaduct itself. They are going to tie a rope to the back of the truck, give it a push down the slope, and then winch it out gradually as it rolls across the bridge. When it falls, they’ll cut the rope and then hurry down to the bottom of the valley to remove the other end from the wreckage. The truck is the one that was used this morning to hijack your friend from the military. This way, the authorities will think he killed himself making his getaway…”

“It’s up to us to stop them, then, isn’t it? The important things to know are, when is this murder due to take place, how far am I from the viaduct, and exactly how do I get there?”

“Where are you now?”

“I’m on the Autobahn about fifteen kilometers southwest of Chemnitz—or Karl Marx-stadt, as they call it now. I crossed the border about an hour ago. It’s funny how quickly those crazy little vineyards in Franconia, with the stone walls that zigzag from one terrace to another, get swallowed up in all this Gothic forest as soon as one’s over that frontier!”

“I’m sure it is. You should be able to get to the valley—you do want to go straight there, I suppose?—in a little less than an hour. That’ll be running it a bit fine, but they do have preparations to make, after all. As far as directions go, it’s about twenty minutes’ drive from Tharandt, to the south

and west of Dresden. But detailed directions would be difficult. Would it help if I gave you a six-figure map coordinate?"

"That would be perfect," Solo said. "But before you do, there's one thing that's puzzling me. You keep on saying 'they'—yet I thought Bartoluzzi was a lone wolf. Where does the hired help come from?"

"It's anything but that! It's the girl I told you about from Prague. My successor. But she seems to be mistress in more senses than one; she's the one that's giving the orders, making the decisions, working everything out. And she keeps on talking about 'my principals' and asking questions as though she were worried about the credit rating of Bart's network. You'd almost think she was trying to buy her way into it!"

"Maybe she is. Does she say who these principals are?"

"Not directly. But she has several times used the name Thrush—Thrush would not permit this, Thrush would expect that," the girl said in a puzzled tone. "Isn't that a funny thing to say!"

Chapter 17

Drama At The Bridge

BY THE TIME Solo reached the lower end of the valley a wind had risen and rain was sweeping down toward him between the trees.

Ten minutes later, he stopped the Citroen at the roadside and took out his field glasses. The viaduct was in full view, spanning a steep, wooded cleft between two belts of forest

—seven tall, narrow arches with a revetment at each end and six slender pillars in between. Even from this distance (it was still six or seven miles away) the agent could see clearly that the small blocks of yellow sandstone composing it had been fatally damaged by erosion.

There were two small observation platforms built out over the third and fifth arches—probably to act as refuges for linesmen when trains passed—but otherwise the single-track road was guarded only by a solitary iron rail above the shallow parapet.

It was no wonder, Solo thought, eyeing the flimsy structure through the binoculars, that they had been forced to bar the approaches!

He drove on—and found to his disgust that he must have made an error in reading the large-scale map of the area. For instead of climbing up to the rim of the valley as he had expected, the road plunged suddenly down and began following its floor. There was a network of lanes and byroads crisscrossing the forest just here, and he had obviously confused two of them in his haste. And so now—although he would arrive at the precise coordinate on the map that the girl had specified—he would be below the viaduct instead of above it.

Agitatedly he traced his path back on the map until he had found the point where he had left the correct route. To regain it, he would have to go back four or five miles… but could be afford the time?

Again he focused the glasses on the bridge. At the higher end he could see signs of activity—the cab of an old-fashioned truck above a clump of

bushes, the roof of a car, figures moving.

No, the macabre stage for murder was already set. There was not a moment to lose; he would have to go on…

The valley road he was following seemed to be fairly well screened by trees. There was nobody actually on the viaduct or its approaches yet. It was just possible that he could run the car up to the arches without being spotted. In any case he would have to try. As quietly as he could, he urged the DS onward.

Overhanging trees and the steepness of the banks prevented him from seeing the ground beyond the lip of the valley—and presumably prevented those up there from seeing him—until he was almost below the bridge. But the slope on which the great piles were built was much gentler, and the trees had all been cut down. For a short distance on each side of the viaduct the road and all traffic on it would be visible to anyone above, if they happened to be watching.

Solo hoped they weren't watching as he coasted the Citroen to a halt under the third archway. It was over the fourth—through which ran the stream that had carved out the valley—that the section of old permanent way was most dangerous, according to Annike. Solo got carefully out of the car and gazed upward.

The viaduct seemed to be immensely high—a multiple facade soaring toward the sky on slender feet that tapered gently toward the top. Solo estimated its height at around a hundred and fifty-feet… and now that he was actually beneath it, he could see how precariously the pillars supported the old track far above. The stonework was cracked and fissured in dozens of places, and there were great gaps at the apex of the central arch where chunks of masonry had fallen away from the part immediately below the road.

He peered around the edge of the pillar and looked up the bank. He could just see the top of the truck's cab, but the steepness of the slope hid the rest of the vehicle and the people working on it. At any minute now, though, the cab might start moving over the bridge… and that would mean Illya Kuryakin would be moving too, moving to a certain death when the roadway collapsed.

Solo scanned the exposed slope bordering the revetment of the viaduct. The arch was wide enough at the bottom to conceal the DS parked behind it. But if he waded in to the rescue up that bank, he would rise into view as

soon as he had scrambled up the first few yards, and for Bartoluzzi and his helper, he would be as easy a target as a duck in a shooting gallery.

Somewhere up there, Annike would be waiting to help him. He had told her to hide along the approach road and contact him when he appeared. But time was running out; he had no time to find her now. He had to get up there and stop that truck from reaching the unsafe part of the bridge.

And from where he was, deep in the valley, there was only one way to do it—he would have to scale the weathered face of the pillar itself!

It was an idea born of desperation. But there was a slim chance it might work. First, he could begin the climb by the car, on the inner side of the pillar, where he would be hidden from the truck. And when he reached the beginning of the curvature of the arch and had to move around to the outside, he could at least profit from the fact that the pile tapered and would thus be leaning very slightly away from him. Instead of forcing himself up a perpendicular face, he would only have to cope with a slope one or two degrees off the vertical!

On the other hand, of course, there was the rain…. Solo shrugged. There was no point in hanging around. He took a half dozen steel climber's pitons from the interior of the car and stuffed them into his jacket pocket with a small, heavy-headed hammer, slid a streamlined Walther model PP automatic into his waistband, and approached the face of the pillar.

Napoleon Solo had done a great many dangerous things in his life, and a good many mad ones too. But the maddest and most dangerous of all was that wild climb in the rain up the crumbling facade of the viaduct near Tharandt.

For the first twenty or thirty feet the sandstone blocks were fairly large and the interstices between them correspondingly wide; climbing was simply a matter of wedging in the toes, reaching up and finding a handhold, taking the weight of the body on the fingers as the foot scrabbled for a higher toehold—and then starting the process over again.

But, as soon as the blocks got smaller and the cracks narrower, the trouble began. Rain was gusting across the valley now in great clouds, plastering Solo's hair to his face, weighing down his clothing, and rendering slippery the polished surfaces of the stone. It was also turning the crumbs of old mortar and eroded flakes of sandstone in the gaps into a greasy paste in which fingers and toes skidded more easily than grasped. Under such

circumstances climbing without a rope up an almost vertical face was a nightmare.

Every foot became a test of willpower, coaxing the screaming muscles and overtaxed sinews to hang on for just that second longer while the questing foot found a temporary resting-place that would take the strain, the groping fingers a crevice that wouldn't flake away the moment any weight was put on it.

When Solo was seventy-five or eighty feet from the ground, the face he was climbing began to curve outward over his head. He had reached the curvature of the arch. Now he would have to move around to the outside of the pillar.

Gritting his teeth, he started to edge around the corner. For a moment he was splayed out, like a butterfly on a pin, with his right hand and foot on the inner face of the pillar and his left on the outer. The problem now was to swing the right hand and foot outward and around the edge without losing purchase with the left while doing it!

Solo knew better than to look down. Behind him was an eighty foot drop to certain death, a dizzying perspective of wet stone dropping away to the road and the stream far below. But he did look up. He had to.

There was more than forty feet of smooth, damp stonework to climb before he reached the parapet. His glance raked the whole wide expanse of the viaduct, and his eye was drawn by the clouds scudding across the sky. As they streamed out of sight behind the facade, it appeared that the clouds stood still and the bridge moved, leaned over toward him… falling toward him, forcing him back and back.

Abruptly the niche into which his left toe was wedged crumbled away and the foot shot into space. He plunged downward.

The shock of the fall tore his right hand and toe away from their holds around the corner, and for a breathtaking moment his body dropped to the full extent of his left arm and he hung giddily over the void supported only by the four fingers of that hand. The air was torn from his lungs in an agonized gasp. From below—seconds later, it seemed

—he heard clearly the patter of rubble on the Citroen's roof. Desperately he fought for purchase, pressing himself as close to the wet stone as he could to minimize the strain on those fingers… and at last his foot found a ledge, it held firm, and then his fingers groped for and found a crack, level and strong enough to hold him.

For the moment the panic was over! With laboring breath, he continued the climb.

The next crisis came when he was only ten feet from the top. The rain increased in volume, stinging his face. The wind plucked at his drenched trousers. And suddenly he could go no further. Shrieking muscles refused to drag his weight up against the pull of gravity any more. Spread eagled between heaven and earth, he dropped his face to the cold stone. His breath sobbed hoarsely in the extremity of his exhaustion. He would have to use the pitons and risk the attention the noise of the hammering would draw.

As he moved one hand warily toward his pocket he heard from somewhere above a curious rhythmic squeaking. Turning his head slowly, he squinted along the line of the bridge toward the abandoned permanent way leading to it.

Now that he was higher up he could see—Bartoluzzi and a girl dressed in black were crouched by a winch in the middle of the road, paying out a hawser hooked to the old truck. And the truck was rolling slowly down the incline toward the viaduct. The squeaking was from one of its wheels.

Solo thought furiously. If he did hammer in the pitons, they would be bound to hear. But in his position, although exposed, he would be a difficult target to hit from the winch.

The parapet would get in the way, and it was in any case an extremely fine angle for a shot. If Bartoluzzi or the girl moved out wide, of course, he would be a sitting duck. But this was just what they could not do; they had to stay at the winch until the truck reached the unsafe central portion of the bridge if they left the rope and let it run free it might simply come to rest against the parapet… or even go over the edge before it reached the weak section. And that would throw doubt on the consciousness of the driver at once; they wanted it to be assumed that he had been driving normally and that the viaduct had collapsed beneath him. Solo should therefore be safe from shooting until the truck had plunged down… and by then he hoped to have reached it himself and pulled on the handbrake anyway!

What would happen then, he would have to decide later. For the moment it was enough to get to the top. Almost before the thought was formed, he was hammering in the first of the iron pegs.

He had rested his weight on it and was pounding on the second when the noise registered with Bartoluzzi and the girl. There was a shout from the winch, followed a moment later by the bark of a heavy caliber pistol.

Solo paid no attention. The squeaking was coming perilously close; the old truck was rolling slowly out over the first arch. He stepped cautiously onto the third peg and looked for a suitable crevice for the next.

Another shot cracked out. And another. Something that sounded like a large insect hammered through the air behind the agent's head. An instant later a shower of stone chips stung his forehead as a slug flattened itself against the wall a little way above him. Two more near misses sent fragments of sandstone flying from the parapet some way to his right and then at last his lacerated fingers had grasped the coping itself and he was hauling himself agonizingly up for the last time to collapse face down on the permanent way beyond the lip.

The truck, between the second and third arches, was just drawing level with him. Through the grimed window he could see the lolling head of Illya Kuryakin drooped over the wheel.

Solo levered himself to his feet. His knees were trembling. He launched himself toward the door of the cab, prepared to wrench it open and dive for the handbrake.

And in that instant the gun by the winch spat flame once more. The bullet seared across Solo's forehead as he was in midleap and dropped him like a stone. The truck rolled on over the third arch.

As it did so, two things happened. In the cab, Kuryakin jerked suddenly upright and blinked his eyes. In the back, the pile of sacks under which he had been conveyed away from the ambushed riot truck was thrown aside and the girl Annike appeared.

She vaulted over the side and ran to the cab before the astonished pair by the winch had recovered sufficiently to fire at her.

Jerking open the door, she jumped onto the running board, leaned in over the awakening Russian and hauled frantically on the handbrake between the seats.

Shuddering, the truck ground to a halt with its front wheels only inches away from the section over the central arch. On the muddy surface of the bridge a network of small cracks appeared, raying outward like the filaments of a spider's web as they watched.

"Quick!" the girl hissed. "For your life's sake! Drop out on the far side and lie underneath. Move!"

Kuryakin had suffered a great deal of pain, but he was not physically damaged. Also he was in superb training and used to hardship—which

explained why the effects of the drug were wearing off sooner than Bartoluzzi had expected. Although the clouds in his mind had not entirely vanished, he reacted to the crisp note of command in the girl's voice and shot into action almost by reflex.

As the girl dropped back to the roadway on her side of the truck, he slid over to the far side of the cab, burst open the door and fell out onto the ground. Together, they crawled beneath the front wheels.

Bullets were whistling toward them from the winch, but for the moment the angle of the slope prevented them from penetrating below the truck.

"I don't know who you are," Illya mumbled through his drugged torpor, "but thank you! And couldn't you perhaps tell me where I am and what's going on?"

In a few crisp sentences, Annike filled him in. And then, "But what about your friend?" she asked. "Shouldn't we do something about him?"

"Solo? Where is he? I haven't seen him since before the case started."

"At the moment he's lying between the offside rear wheel and a kind of refuge built out from this viaduct like the flying bridge of a ship."

"Lying…? Good heavens!" Kuryakin exclaimed. "I'll go and get him." And suddenly alert again, he wormed his way toward the rear of the truck, scuttled rapidly out to grab Solo's ankles, and then hauled him back into shelter as a fusillade of bullets thwacked and spanged into the ancient vehicle above their heads.

"Is he hurt badly?" the girl asked anxiously.

"I don't think so. Fortunately, he was just creased—see, the furrow has hardly bled at all. But he'll be out of commission for an hour or so. Just when we need him most… *Ah*!" He had been feeling in Solo's pockets. Now he produced the Walther from Solo's waistband with a triumphant flourish.

Wriggling up until he was below the back axle, he squeezed off a couple of experimental shots. Marinka and the Corsican hastily ducked out of sight behind an old Steyr saloon that was facing back up the hill a little way behind the winch. From the shelter of this they loosed off desultory shots at the truck.

"If I could keep them pinned down there until Solo recovers…" the Russian called over his shoulder. And then suddenly he stopped and looked upward. Rain was falling on his head.

A stray slug, penetrating the wooden back of the cab, had bit the handle of the handbrake, knocking it off its ratchet and allowing the truck to resume its interrupted descent. Slowly, inexorably, their shelter withdrew, leaving them exposed on the rain-swept viaduct.

The truck itself rolled onto the cracked center section, continued across it… and then suddenly it wasn't there.

With the speed of a demon king in pantomime, it simply dropped from sight. The entire center of the arch, as soon as it received the full weight of the truck, plummeted downward with a roar like that of the trains the viaduct had once carried on their way. From below, the shattering reverberation of the impact was followed by a cannonade of blocks and small stones from the raw edge of the chasm. A cloud of choking yellow dust mushroomed up over the gap and blanketed them from sight.

Through the swirling fog they heard Bartoluzzi shouting: "No, no. Don't shoot now! We'll get them alive and drop them over on to the wreckage. It's perfect; it'll keep to my original plan, and the two extra bodies will provide scapegoats for the ambush of the riot truck."

When the dust had cleared enough for them to distinguish the winch, they could see the Corsican whispering something to the girl and pointing back up the hill toward his headquarters. The girl nodded. She eased the leather helmet from her head, shook loose a mane of blonde hair, and started off at a run.

"Who does she think she is?" Kuryakin asked. "She's auditioning for a part in an espionage series on television?"

"She's gone back for the helicopter," Annike said tightly. "We won't have a chance… and look!" She was pointing at the car. Crouched down in the driver's seat, Bartoluzzi was backing it cautiously toward them. He steered around the winch, with its snapped hawser, and slowly drew nearer along the bridge.

Illya felt in Solo's pocket for another clip of ammunition and fired the Walther as fast as he could. Glass in the Steyr's back window starred, and gasoline began to spray from the drilled tank below the spare tire.

But the Corsican continued to advance. When the car was only ten yards away, he stopped, ducking out of sight behind the seat. Obviously his tactic was to block them there until the girl arrived with the helicopter.

The rain redoubled in force. Beneath them, they felt the viaduct tremble in a surge of wind.

And suddenly it happened again. Safe enough while the structure was whole and rigid, the second arch became unsafe as soon as the bridge was breached. Beneath the car, the road appeared to warp. They watched, horrified, as the parapet on one side dipped sickeningly, canting the surface at a crazy angle. The heavy saloon began to slide toward the edge as great cracks zigzagged across the width of the bridge. They could see Bartoluzzi frantically fighting to reach the door on the upper side and open it. And then, with a roar like an artillery barrage, roadway, parapet, refuge, car and guard rails collapsed into nothing, vanished in a cloud of dust as dense as the first.

In a few minutes the girl from THRUSH would be back gunning for them in her helicopter.

And they were stuck like pigeons on a roost—marooned on a single isolated pillar of the ruined bridge…

Chapter 18

Nothing To Report

THE GIRL was crying, her drenched hair plastered across her cheek as she kneeled on the muddy road. “I’m… I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “But he was… he used to be… I was very fond of him once.”

Kuryakin kept a sympathetic silence. After a while the girl said quaveringly, “Is there any chance… your friend climbed up, I suppose we couldn’t possibly climb *down*?”

The Russian peered over the edge into the dizzying depths of the valley. The single pile on which they were stuck, now that it had lost its anchorage at both ends, was swaying like a reed in the wind, and every few seconds they could hear another shower of stones break loose and plunge down to swell the twin disasters of rock strewn across the floor of the defile. He shook his head. “For one man, coming up, with the viaduct rigid, it was crazy enough,” he said soberly. “But to try going down, with the pillar rocking like this and an unconscious man to carry… you might just as well jump!”

“What will happen when that… when she comes back?”

“She has only one aim now. THRUSH was interested in taking over Bartoluzzi’s network, but only if he was there to operate it. He was the only one with the knowledge of all the details. Now that he’s dead, I’m afraid her sole course is to eliminate the witnesses and go. They’ll just write the project off as a deal that didn’t materialize.”

Five minutes later, the helicopter skimmed over the trees from the north and sailed across the valley, circling the pillar. They watched the black figure of the girl pull back the Plexiglas door, level a submachine gun with one hand, and coax the machine lower and nearer with the other.

Kuryakin pushed the girl to the ground beside Solo and flung himself across them as the stutter of the gun drowned out the noise of the helicopter’s rotors. Fragments of rock spurted up from the road and drew

blood from his cheek as the line of slugs ripped past only inches from his head.

The helicopter was turning, preparing for another run… and all at once he was aware of a third sound, louder than either of the other two. He twisted his head and looked up. Incredibly, a second helicopter, much larger than the girl's, was slanting over the valley toward it, spitting flame from the open door in its nose.

Marinka turned her machine swiftly. It rose in the air like an elevator and made off rapidly toward the west. Evidently she preferred to live to fight another day… and anyway there wasn't much the witnesses could say against *her*!

The bigger machine hovered over the stricken viaduct. A rope ladder snaked down to the top of the pillar. And over a bullhorn a voice exclaimed in the fruitiest accents of County Cork: "Going up now, ladies and gentlemen! Going up! Networks. Settlement of Accounts. Rescue Service. Information. Going up now *please*…"

It was Habib Tufik, alias Hendrik van der Lee.

Smiling genially, he surveyed them from his wheelchair as one of the two bland Dutchmen crewing the plane helped them to get Solo up the ladder.

They had barely closed the transparent hatch in the blister when the solitary pillar from which they had been rescued collapsed into the valley in a great fountain of dust that rose hundreds of feet into the air.

"But how did you get here? How did you know?" Napoleon Solo asked a little later as they applied a dressing to the wound in his temple.

"I'm afraid that was me," Annike said. "You had lent me that nice little radio. I know a little about them… and I couldn't resist calling up my employer and telling him why I was late for work!"

"A good thing you did," Illya smiled. "Also that you hid in the back of that truck instead of waiting for Napoleon along the road as you arranged."

"You know how it is with Napoleons," the girl said. "They're always retreating! A girl has to make all the advances herself, these days!"

"As soon as I'm upright again I shall be honored to prove the converse of that remark!" U.N.C.L.E.'s Chief Enforcement Officer riposted.

"Sure, 'tis a fine, enterprisin' spirit you have there, the two of you!" the fat man said enthusiastically. "And it's similar to the one I've employed

here meself at all. But seein' as how it's still well short of six o'clock, you can profit, from the cheap-rate day tariff, you."

"Day tariff?" Solo echoed. "Cheap rate?"

"To be sure. For the Van der Lee emergency escape service. I was thinkin' of starting a network, a European network, just to be used for getting the boyos out of scrapes. Do you not think that would be a good idea now?"

"You're incorrigible! Send in a bill," Solo said. "What I'd be much more interested in would be a service for writing reports! How I hate doing it… and I've just remembered—we shall have to do just that for Waverly."

"You're worrying for nothing, Napoleon," Kuryakin soothed. "It's all been attended to. It's done already.

"But… how can it be? We've just…"

"I did it myself. Tufik… er, our friend here, that is to say… kindly coded it for me and dispatched it via the plane's transmitter. It was quite short."

"Illya—what did you say, for heaven's sake?"

"I said we had investigated the existence of the reported criminals' escape organization in Europe… and that there was no foundation for the reports…"

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[1] See The Man From U.N.C.L.E. #16 *The Splintered Sunglasses Affair*

[2] See The Man From U.N.C.L.E #7 *The Radioactive Camel Affair*

[3] See The Man From U.N.C.L.E #9 *The Diving Dames Affair*